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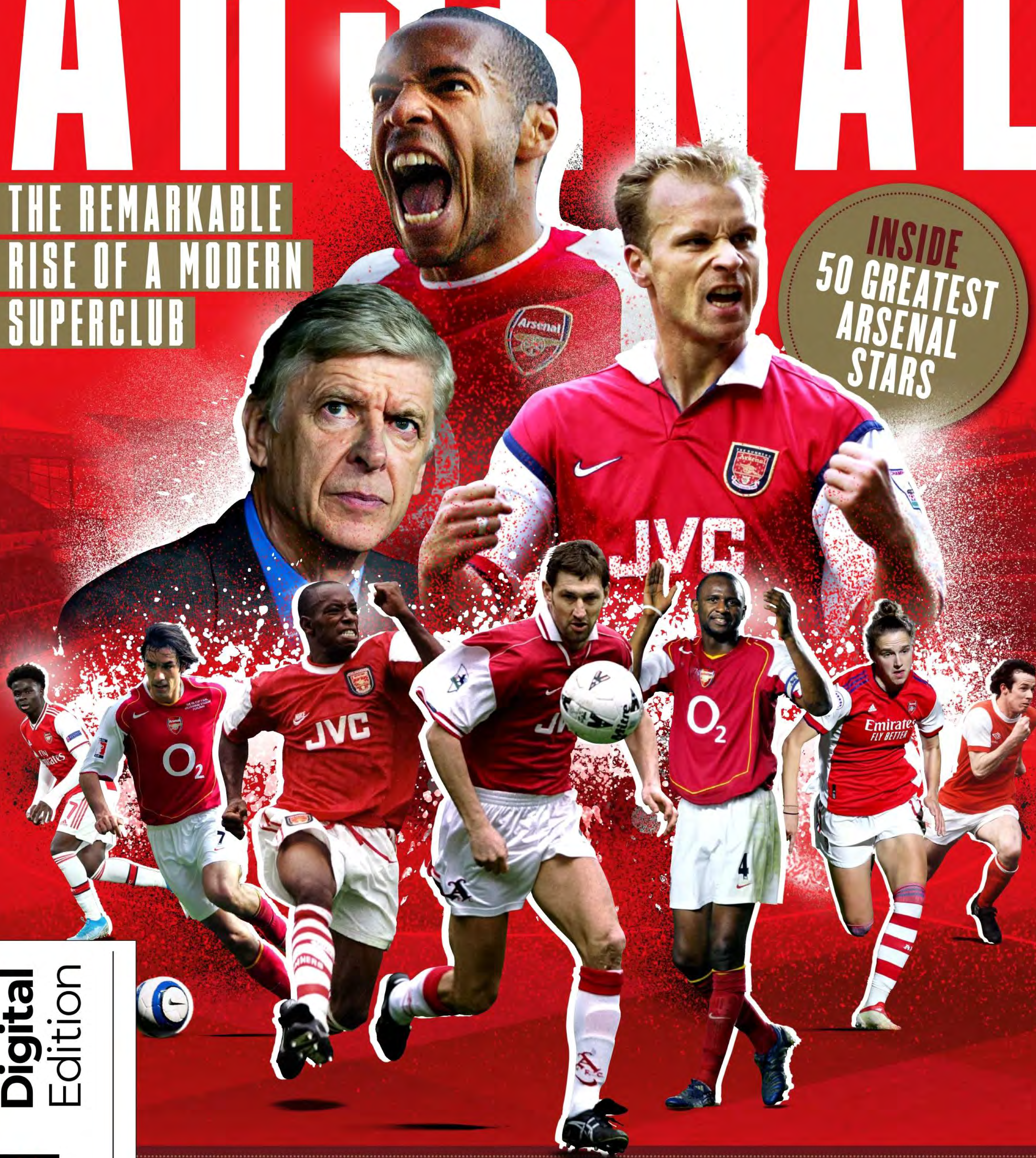
FourFourTwo PRESENTS...

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THE STORY OF ARSENAL

THE REMARKABLE RISE OF A MODERN SUPERCLUB

INSIDE 50 GREATEST ARSENAL STARS



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Digital Edition

FUTURE

THIRD EDITION

THE INVINCIBLES • ANFIELD 89 • DAVID ROCASTLE • ARSENAL WOMEN


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“ONE-NIL TO THE ARSENAL!”

One of the most famous clubs in world football, Arsenal’s rich history is filled with visionary managers, world-class players and magical moments that most rival clubs’ fans could only ever dream of. In the Story of Arsenal we celebrate the club’s proud history, from humble beginnings in South London to the Chapman era, from ‘boring, boring Arsenal’ to the Invincibles. Inside you’ll find exclusive interviews with Arsene Wenger, Dennis Bergkamp and the fans’ newest hero, Declan Rice, as well as a wealth of fascinating features on the unbeaten season, *that* night at Anfield in 1989, Arsenal Women, Arteta’s revolution, and much more.


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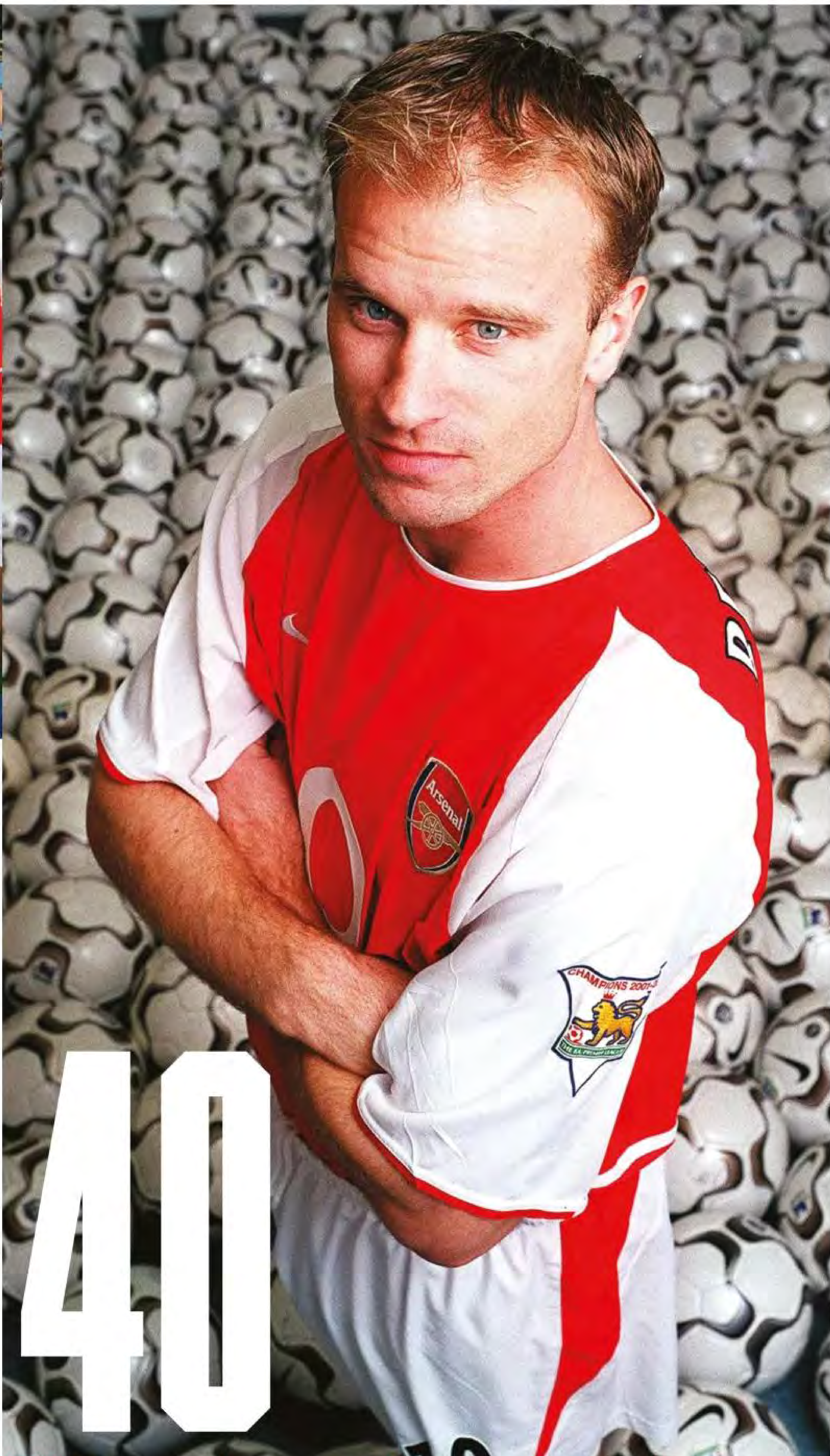
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BRIEF HISTORY OF



ARSENAL

With over 135 years of history, Arsenal are one of the most storied clubs in England. We take you through the history of one of English football's behemoths

Words Tim Stillman



Image PA/Alamy

Formed by the workers of a Woolwich munitions factory in 1886, Arsenal were a fairly middling South East London football club until shortly before World War I. That is until property magnate and chairman Henry Norris took the decision to move the club to North London in 1913. Applying his real estate knowledge, Norris reasoned that the club's potential would multiply in this accessible and leafy area of the capital.

History would prove him correct, but it was the introduction of visionary manager Herbert Chapman in 1925 that really catapulted the club into the upper echelons of the game, breaking the North's stranglehold on football's most prized domestic trophies. Chapman died tragically in 1934, but his legacy would prove to be immortal. After Chapman won the club's first major trophy in 1930, Arsenal would go on to win a total of 13 league titles, 14 FA Cups, two League Cups and two European trophies.

In more technicolour times, Arsenal are renowned for their 2003-04 feat of winning the Premier League title without tasting defeat. They have since changed stadiums again, this time moving just a stone's throw from Highbury to the Emirates Stadium. This is the story of the Arsenal Football Club.

THE FORMATION

Prior to 1886, association football hadn't really taken hold in Woolwich, which was regarded as much more of a rugby and cricket area. However, the Royal Arsenal munitions factory, which employed around 11,500 men, would prove to be a curious enough environment for the formation of a football club, as the shortened working week allowed the men who worked in the factory greater leisure time on Saturday afternoons.

Nearby, in the Isle of Dogs, Morton's Canning Factory started Millwall Athletic in 1885 with great success. In the Dial Square workshop, part of the Royal Gun Factory and Royal Arsenal, several

Above The Royal Gun Factory in Woolwich, where the workers formed the Dial Square Football Club in 1886





"THE BATTLE TO TURN PROFESSIONAL CREATED INTERNAL STRUGGLES, WITH A NUMBER OF WORKERS WISHING TO KEEP THE CLUB AMATEUR"

Above Arsenal Stadium under construction in August 1912. A fortnight later, it would host its first-ever game **Below** Woolwich Arsenal playing Newcastle United in their final season prior to moving to North London

members of the Dial Square cricket team wanted a winter pastime. In October 1886, the Dial Square cricket team held a traditional 'smoking concert' (an end of season gentlemen's evening) and agreed to form a football club. Arrangements were formalised, including the team name, Dial Square FC, principally by David Danskin and Elijah Watkins.

On December 11, 1886, Dial Square played their first-ever game, against Eastern Wanderers in the Isle of Dogs, almost certainly a team derived from the Great Eastern pub, close to the Millwall pier. Dial Square quickly rebranded themselves as Royal Arsenal and then Woolwich Arsenal, and their early years were ones of struggle. They moved from the Sportsman Ground on Plumstead Common to the nearby Invicta Ground and then back again due to extortionate rent.

They earned the censure of the London and Kent FAs for their attempts to turn the club professional when professionalism was restricted to clubs from the North and the Midlands. As a munitions factory in the time of the Boer War, the factory was attracting men from all over the country, and so was the football team. After a lengthy standoff, Woolwich Arsenal, who were fed up with hosting Northern and Midlands-based teams who would use games to try to poach their players, finally got their wish in 1893 and became the first Southern member of the Football League.

The battle to turn professional created internal struggles too, with a number of the workers wishing to keep the club as an amateur concern. Had the so-called 'Weaver clique' won control of the club and kept it amateur, it is certain that the club would have tumbled out of existence with all the other extinct clubs from the Victorian era. However, turning professional and moving back to a purpose-built ground in Plumstead was only the start of the battle.

In an inaccessible corner of London and with the end of the Boer War in 1902, Woolwich Arsenal were struggling to attract crowds and settled into life as a middling club. Again, had they stayed in Woolwich, it is very unlikely that the Arsenal we see today would be among the Premier League elite. Far more likely is that they would have achieved the level of nearby Millwall and Charlton, flitting between the second and third tiers. It was a man called Henry Norris who recognised that the club needed to break free from its Woolwich womb to become a true competitor.

HENRY NORRIS AND HIGHBURY

By the time Henry Norris took a controlling stake in Woolwich Arsenal in 1910, the club were in serious financial trouble due to sinking crowd figures and had gone into voluntary liquidation. Norris had made his money as a property developer in Fulham and held a position on the board at Fulham FC. Initially, Norris's idea was to merge Fulham and Woolwich Arsenal to create a London superclub, an idea the Football League blocked. Who knows whether Norris would have gone through with his share purchase had he anticipated that the Football League would foil his ambition? ▸



Norris and William Hall, who bought into the club with him, eventually sought to move the club to a different location. Over the years tales have passed into club mythology suggesting that Norris and Hall deliberately starved the team and the stadium of funds to make a stronger case for relocation, though there is no proof of such skulduggery. Woolwich Arsenal were relegated to the Second Division in 1912-13 during what would be their final year in Woolwich.

Through his contacts in the church and his acute understanding of gentrification, Norris's eye fell on the St John's College of Divinity playing fields in Highbury, Islington. With good underground links to Holborn and Leicester Square, strong local transport links to Hackney, and a situation in a leafy part of Islington, Norris felt this was a far more fertile ground for a thriving football club.

He faced strong opposition from the local NIMBY community, but they proved to be no match for Sir Henry's contacts book. Local fans of Woolwich Arsenal were enraged too, but Norris shrugged off their concerns, reasoning that there were not enough of them to keep the club solvent (and he had a point). He also invited the wrath of nearby clubs Tottenham Hotspur and Clapton Orient (later Leyton Orient), but Norris was not unduly perturbed by either.

As part of the deal to rent the St John's College of Divinity sports ground, Norris promised not to play on holy days or sell "intoxicating liquor" on site, a promise he kept for one whole season. Designed by Scottish architect Archibald Leitch, who helped to design many football stadia at the time, amazingly the stadium was built in just one summer. The Arsenal Stadium had a partially covered stand on the East side and then three muddy banks of terracing, trodden into the earth by men's boots.



The total cost ran to £125,000, and with contemporary health and safety legislation practically non-existent, Highbury opened unfinished (there was no running water available and a few abandoned milk carts were on hand in case a player needed to be stretchered off) on September 6, 1913. The team marked the occasion with a 2-1 win against Leicester Fosse. Norris gave the men who built the stadium free season tickets, both as an inexpensive form of payment but also to build morale and a connection with this nomadic team.

Norris's plan, despite contemporary opposition, was farsighted and vindicated in a way that he wouldn't live to fully realise. In 1929, he was banned from football for life for pocketing the sale of the Arsenal team bus and for using the club's expense account to fund his private chauffeur. Though he had sped up the evolution of the club, his relinquishment proved to be healthy, for it created a power vacuum that would be filled by one Herbert Chapman.

HERBERT CHAPMAN AND THE 1930S

"My grandfather always said he (Chapman) should have been the prime minister." So said former Arsenal chairman Peter Hill-Wood, whose grandfather Samuel served as chairman from 1929 until 1936. Herbert Chapman arrived at Arsenal in 1925, drawn by the prospect of turning a London team into a powerhouse. In 1925, the North of England was still the heartbeat of the sport and the two most southerly based First Division champions had been West Brom and Aston Villa.

Chapman had formed a solid managerial reputation at Northampton Town and Leeds City, but it was at Huddersfield ▸

Above Visionary Arsenal manager Herbert Chapman **Right** The famous Marble Hall entrance in the Highbury East Stand **Far Right** Fans look on from the scaffolding of the nearly completed East Stand in 1936

ARSENAL'S SPIRITUAL HOME



Arsenal lived a relatively hand-to-mouth existence in their original hometown of Woolwich until chairman Henry Norris, a Fulham property magnate, had the idea to merge the club with Fulham to create a London superclub. The Football Association had other ideas, so Norris had to rethink. Arsenal eventually purchased the St John's College of Divinity in Islington. Norris felt that the location, in the leafiest area of Islington and just a short tube ride from the West End or bus journey from Hackney and Hoxton, would attract a far bigger fan base than their far less accessible Woolwich location.

Once again it was Herbert Chapman who transformed Highbury, literally. He instructed the club to build the palatial East Stand and iconic Marble Halls, which were crafted by top architects William Binnie and French designer Claude Ferrier. The mixture of the stadium renovation, the all-conquering team that played inside it and the years that had passed since the move from south of the river really cemented Highbury as the soul of Arsenal Football Club.

Built snugly into the Avenell Road, Highbury was the heartbeat of its community, barely visible from the surrounding streets until you approached its East Stand entrance. With its cantilever stands and Art Deco design, the stadium oozed status. The tight tunnel area and the proximity between stands and pitch made the place at once intimidating and reverential but homely too, much like an old church or museum. Thierry Henry, possibly Highbury's most gifted son, referred to it as "my garden".

"HIGHBURY OPENED UNFINISHED ON SEPTEMBER 6, 1913. THE TEAM MARKED THE OCCASION WITH A 2-1 WIN AGAINST LEICESTER FOSSE"

Town where he began to strive towards greatness. He won the FA Cup with the Terriers in 1922 and the First Division title in 1924 and 1925 (they would win the title again in 1926 with his successor Cecil Potter). But when Arsenal put out an advert for a new manager in the *Athletic News* in 1925 (with a generous salary offer attached) Chapman moved down south with the ambition to put London on the footballing map.

On the pitch, his ideas took time to fully bear fruit, but his off-pitch innovations quickly caught the eye as he sought to build the foundations of a new club. His first act possibly had the most profound impact: signing 34-year-old striker Charlie Buchan from Sunderland. Buchan had left Woolwich Arsenal in a row over expenses as a teenager in 1909, and now the Gunners would break the bank to re-sign him, paying £2,000 as well as £100 for each goal he scored in his debut season. He scored 21 goals, bringing his transfer fee to £4,100.

A teenager who leaves a football club in a row over expenses in pre-World War I Britain cannot be accused of being a shrinking violet. Buchan also trained as a teacher, so he knew how to speak up. Chapman was out of step as a manager in the 1920s; not only did he take a hands-on approach to training and recovery in an era where managers did not routinely deal with those things, but he also wanted player input. In fact he actively sought it.

Buchan gave Chapman and his teammates a piece of his mind in a team meeting on the train home from Newcastle following a 7-0 defeat at St James' in October 1925. He suggested pulling an extra player away from midfield and into the back line. It led to the masterful counterattacking 'WM formation' that Chapman pioneered. Arsenal would lose the FA Cup Final to Cardiff City in 1927 as they continued to grapple with Chapman's ideas.

However, the signing of key players like David Jack, Cliff Bastin and Alex James brought the formation to life and Arsenal swept to the FA Cup in 1930 as well as league titles in 1931, 1933, 1934, 1935 and 1938 and another FA Cup in 1936. Arsenal dominated the decade, though Chapman would only live to see a fraction of it. On January 6, 1934, at just 55 years old, the man who had made Arsenal suddenly died of pneumonia at his home in Hendon, London.

Football had lost one of its finest thinkers, for Chapman's innovations went way beyond the decade-defining team that he put together. He had been the one who ordered the rebuild of Highbury, with roofed stands and the palatial surroundings of the Marble Halls in the East Stand, which included a restaurant. Chapman had felt that supporters should not be taken for granted with sports like speedway rapidly growing in popularity.

His other ideas included numbered shirts, floodlights, a pan-European competition and that the Arsenal home shirt should include white sleeves. He even persuaded London Underground to change the name of Gillespie Road tube station to 'Arsenal' in one of the most exceptional pieces of football club branding ever devised. Herbert Chapman was far more than a football manager.

POST-WAR DECLINE

Arsenal were able to continue collecting trophies in the years immediately following Chapman's death. Former broadcaster and programme editor George Allison took the manager's job, but in reality Chapman's trusted assistants Joe Shaw and Tom Whittaker coached the team. The team was so well drilled in Chapman's revolutionary WM system that they adopted an 'as you were' approach, and a mixture of good coaching from Shaw and Whittaker, good overseeing and delegation from Allison and muscle memory kept them at the summit of the English game.

However, cracks began to appear later in the decade as Alex James neared retirement. As a deep-lying playmaker, his vision and big switches of play were crucial to the team's function and he was a very difficult cog to replace. The eruption of World War II then halted league football for seven years, and by the time it returned most of the squad were either in their dotage or retired.

Arsenal were not exactly flush with funds with which to build a new team either. Like most football clubs, seven years without gate



Left Inspirational captain Frank McLintock lifts the FA Cup in 1971
Top right Arsenal's friendly against Glasgow Rangers at Highbury in 1951
Right Ian Wright opens the scoring in the 1993 FA Cup Final
Below right Billy Wright struggled to lift the club to its former glories



receipts left them close to the brink of bankruptcy. Highbury was used as an air-raid shelter during the war and the roof of the North Bank collapsed under duress from a German air raid in June 1944. Without Chapman's structure in place, Allison resigned in 1947, recognising the size of the task at hand.

Tom Whittaker took the helm and presciently said upon his arrival, "Someone has to push himself too hard for Arsenal, Chapman worked himself to death for this club and if that is my fate, so be it." Whittaker died of a cardiac arrest in 1956 while still in the manager's position. He did, however, manage to bring the league title back to Highbury in 1948 and 1953 as well as an FA Cup in 1950, inspired by the cut-price signing of veteran players like Joe Mercer and Ronnie Rooke.

Whittaker was the last coaching link to Chapman left at the club, and Arsenal, already floundering as Whittaker worked himself to death to keep Arsenal competitive, fell into a decline. Jack Crayston, George Swindin and Billy Wright all took the reins thereafter but with little tangible success. The league title in 1953 would mark Arsenal's last silverware in 17 years as the Gunners struggled to reconcile their post-Chapman legacy. They had to make the most logical move available to rekindle their love affair with success. They had to appoint their physiotherapist to the manager's position.

GRAHAM AND MEE

In the summer of 1966, Arsenal took the unusual step of appointing Bertie Mee, their physio, as manager. The move would prove to be a stroke of genius. The club had talented players and a youth team with a number of up-and-coming prospects, but Mee's predecessor, Billy Wright, was widely regarded as too nice to corral them into a precise unit. Mee had a reputation as a hard taskmaster, no doubt forged by his Royal Marine Corps background.

It was felt that Mee's focus on discipline and hard work was just the medicine an ailing squad needed. He was smart enough to recognise his tactical shortcomings and hired highly rated coaches Dave Sexton and Don Howe as his assistants. On the pitch, the team was marshalled by inspirational captain and centre-half Frank McLintock. Mee replaced star players with young, hungry academy talent like Charlie George, Ray Kennedy, Pat Rice and John Radford. One of Mee's most trusted attackers, George Graham, was taking notes for later.

There were bumps in the road, with defeat to Leeds in the League Cup Final in 1968 followed by an embarrassing loss to Third Division Swindon in the final of the same competition the following year. But Arsenal were back competing again. The players still complained about the legacy of the 1930s, with the players from that era still regular visitors at Highbury and pictures of their success dotted around Highbury.

"If those pictures bother you," remarked coach Don Howe pithily, "replace them with your own." They did. In 1970 they won the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup, overturning a 3-0 deficit to





defeat Belgian side Anderlecht over two legs in the final. The following season they won the league and FA Cup Double, the first in the club's history. They even sealed the league title at Spurs' White Hart Lane.

However, the glory proved to be short-lived. Don Howe left to take the manager's job at West Brom in 1971 after he felt disrespected at the club's celebration dinner. Arsenal went close to winning the league again in 1973, but without Howe's 'good cop' influence with the players, Mee's 'bad cop' approach became abrasive and several players left. Mee resigned in 1976 as the club flirted with the drop.

Terry Neill followed and brought the club the 1979 FA Cup. He was succeeded by Don Howe in 1983, but he could not rekindle the magic of the Double team. That job was left to one of the players from that side, George Graham, who took over in 1986. Like Mee, he had a reputation as a disciplinarian and, like Mee, he shifted renowned international stars from his squad to make way for an emerging crop of academy talent that included Paul Merson, Tony Adams, David Rocastle and Michael Thomas.

The 1987 League Cup Final win over Liverpool proved to be a catalyst, and on May 26, 1989, Arsenal won their first league title in 18 years with a dramatic final-day victory at Anfield. Needing to win by two clear goals at the home of the defending champions, Arsenal did just that, snatching the second goal in stoppage time via Michael Thomas on possibly the greatest night in Arsenal's history.

A further league title followed in 1991, but Arsenal became more of a cup team after that. Spurred on by striker Ian Wright, who would eventually break the club's goalscoring record, they won an FA Cup and League Cup double in 1993 and a Cup Winners' Cup in 1994. However, much like Mee, Graham's abrasiveness ▶

Images PA/Alamy (McLintock), Arsenal FC/Getty Images (1951), Bob Thomas Sports Photography via Getty Images (Ian Wright), Popperfoto via Getty Images (Billy Wright)


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NOISY NEIGHBOURS

Arsenal's move to North London in 1913 was not greeted warmly. Many of Arsenal's local supporters felt betrayed by the move, and then there was the NIMBY community in Islington, who didn't really want a football stadium in their back garden. However, the biggest voice of objection came from a nearby Middlesex club called Tottenham Hotspur. The *Tottenham Herald* newspaper displayed an advertisement advising its readership "not to go and support Norris' Woolwich interlopers".

Tensions rose further in 1919 when the English Football League held an election to decide which teams should compete in the First Division. Such elections were commonplace in the early years of the Football League, and this one was required to tie up some loose ends after a messy conclusion to the 1914-15 season before league football was suspended in support of the war effort.

Arsenal, who had finished sixth in the Second Division in 1915, were voted into the top-flight, while Tottenham, who finished bottom of the First Division and were relegated, did not poll enough votes from their peers and played in the second tier.

The enmity has remained for over a century as Spurs have been forced to look on as Arsenal claimed league titles on their White Hart Lane patch twice. In 2001, the Gunners even signed Tottenham's captain Sol Campbell on a free transfer. Arsenal's every visit to their neighbours is soundtracked by a tuneful invitation from the home support to "f*** off back to Woolwich," while Arsenal gleefully remind their hosts how many times they have won the league at White Hart Lane.

began to grate on the players as the team dropped down the league, and the Scotsman was unceremoniously sacked in 1995.

ALONG CAME ARSENE

Arsenal tried to rediscover their elite status with the signings of David Platt and Dennis Bergkamp in the summer of 1995. The club procured Bolton coach Bruce Rioch, but his sergeant major approach was too similar to Graham's to really curry favour with the players. Despite an improved fifth-placed finish in 1995-96, Rioch was sacked that summer. In his place a little-known French coach named Arsene Wenger was appointed.

Prior to his arrival in London, Wenger had been coaching Nagoya Grampus Eight in Japan, vice-chairman David Dein remembered being impressed by Wenger's knowledge and charisma after meeting him in the director's box at a match in the early 1990s while Wenger was managing Monaco, so when Rioch's departure created a vacancy Dein took the opportunity to persuade the club to take a chance on the football manager who looked like a geography teacher and

> "IN HIS PLACE A LITTLE-KNOWN FRENCH COACH NAMED ARSENE WENGER WAS APPOINTED"

possessed an equally academic knowledge of the game. The board would soon be rewarded for their faith.

Arsene transformed the club, introducing dietary changes, training regime tweaks and a new style of total football that prolonged the careers of several of Arsenal's ageing squad. He then guided them to the league and FA Cup Double in 1997-98 with a blessed combination of the famous back five and Ray Parlour, as well as continental signings like Patrick Vieira, Marc Overmars and Emmanuel Petit. His team was the perfect marriage of grit and grace.

In 1999, Wenger added his former Monaco prodigy Thierry Henry to his arsenal, as well as highly rated Tottenham captain Sol Campbell in 2001, and the club went from strength to strength, winning another league and cup Double in 2002 before winning the league without a single defeat in the 2003-04 season, all while playing a brand of football that had neutrals and rival fans purring in admiration. The rivalry with Alex Ferguson's Manchester United during this era would become the stuff of legend and propelled the Premier League towards becoming the continent's elite domestic product.

Encouraged by Wenger, the club moved to the 60,000-capacity Emirates Stadium in 2006 shortly after narrowly missing out on the Champions League after a heart-breaking final defeat to Barcelona in Paris. The team slipped a little in league terms as they grappled with stadium debt and the new spending power of Chelsea and then Manchester City. Though Wenger and Arsenal broke a nine-year trophy drought in 2014 with the FA Cup (before adding further cups in 2015 and 2017), the late Arsene era proved to be divisive.

Some fans felt he continued to do an excellent job in a changing landscape, while others felt he had too much agency and that his powers were on the wane. He left in 2018 after 22 years in charge. His successor, Unai Emery, only lasted 18 months before former captain Mikel Arteta took the hotseat in December 2019. The club won the FA Cup during his first season in charge, and the Spaniard continues to rebuild a club still finding its way in the post-Wenger era.



Left Arsene Wenger's early teams were the perfect combination of grit and grace **Top** Arsenal fans spill onto the White Hart Lane pitch in May 1971 as the Gunners seal the league title **Above** Wenger walks out at the Emirates Stadium for the last time

Images Shaun Botterill/Getty Images (Henry), Stuart MacFarlane/Arsenal FC via Getty Images (Wenger,), Popperfoto via Getty Images (White Hart Lane)

ARSENAL'S GREATEST EVER MANAGERS

Arsenal have had a total of 20 full-time managers in their 136-year history. We take a look at ten of the best to have sported the club blazer

Words Tim Stillman

Arsenal's most recent managerial appointment, Mikel Arteta, set tongues wagging in the football world as the ex-Gunners skipper was undertaking his first-ever managerial appointment in the difficult post-Arsene Wenger landscape. But it is not the most radical appointment in the club's history – what about the time that an Arsenal side that were over a decade without a trophy appointed the club physio to the managerial hotseat and promptly won the Double? Or the former player whose devil-may-care on-pitch attitude earned him the nickname 'Stroller' as an Arsenal player but, 15 years later, his hard-line disciplinarian approach earned him the moniker 'Gaddafi'?

Or what about the bespectacled Frenchman who, as his adversary Alex Ferguson once spat dismissively, 'came here from Japan'? Then of course there is the absolutely legendary figure of Herbert Chapman. Chapman not only put Arsenal Football Club on the map (literally, as he had the name of Gillespie Road underground station changed to 'Arsenal'), but he also sped up the evolution of the sport altogether with his far-reaching ideas about the game both tactically and as a spectacle.

Arsenal have made a lot of good, bad, indifferent and eye-raising managerial appointments in their time. Here, we take a look at ten of the best.

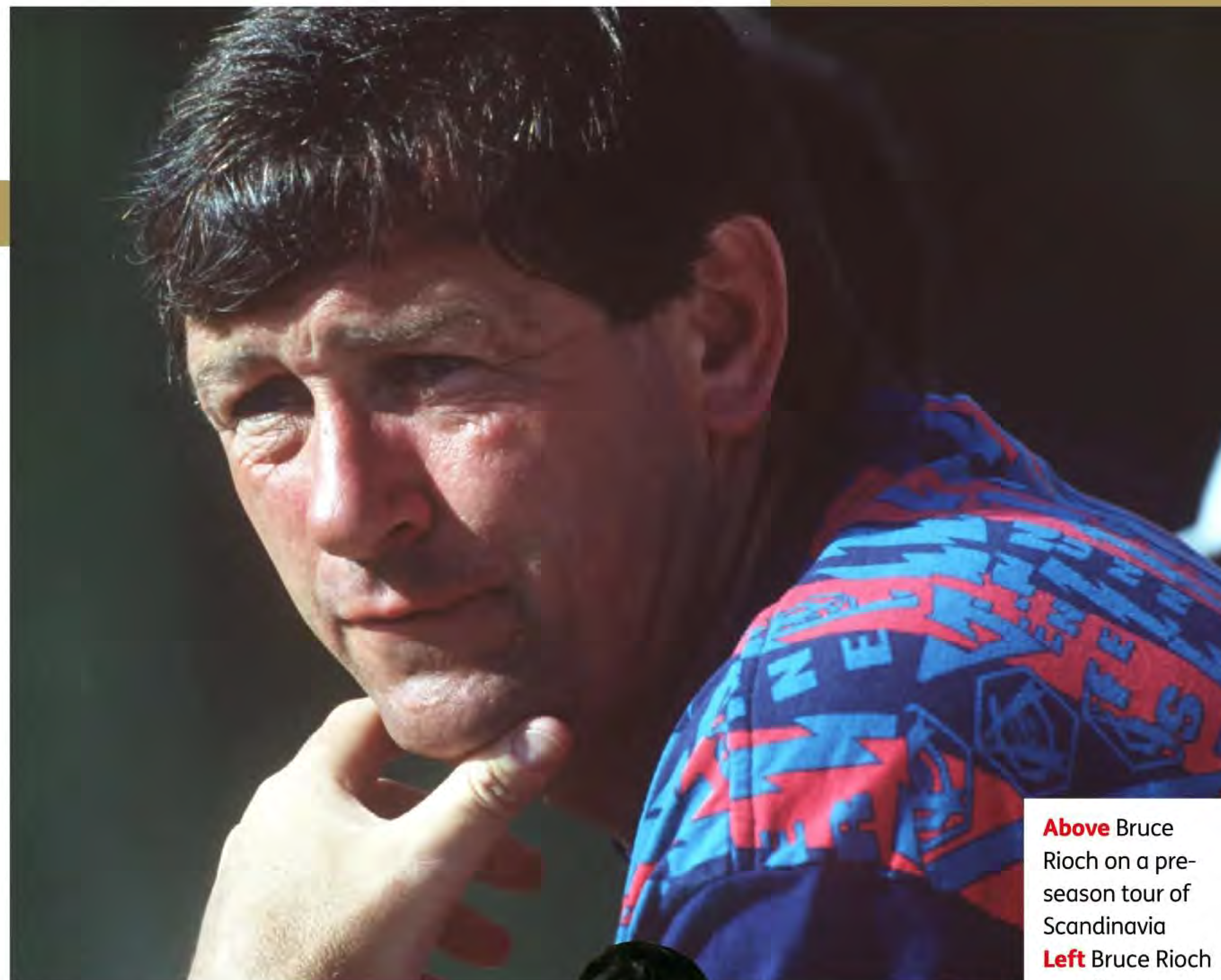






Double-winning manager Bertie Mee poses next to the bust of Herbert Chapman in Highbury's famous Marble Halls

Images Express/Getty Images (main), Mike Hewitt/Allsport UK/Getty Images (Graham)



10 BRUCE RIOCH
1995-1996

Bruce Rioch was appointed during the summer of 1995 promising to sweep a new broom through a club that had gone stale under the stewardship of George Graham, who was sacked in February 1995 for off-field reasons. The Gunners finished 12th in the Premier League in Graham's final campaign and were 13th on the day that he was relieved of his duties. Caretaker Stewart Houston took the reins for the remainder of the 1994-95 season before the appointment of Rioch.

The Scot was a working facsimile of Graham in terms of his approach. He had forged a good reputation in the lower leagues, as Graham had, with successful spells at Middlesbrough, Millwall and Bolton. The son of a sergeant major, Rioch also had a reputation as a disciplinarian. Rioch's reign is not remembered too fondly, he fell out with Ian Wright, causing the striker to hand in a transfer request and there was a sense that he could not translate his hardnosed Football League style of coaching into the more glamorous Premier League.

However, he signed David Platt and Dennis Bergkamp during his first summer (he also tried to procure George Weah, Alan Shearer and, errr, Jason McAteer). Arsenal moved from 12th to 5th place under Rioch and even if it was an awkward marriage, he stabilised a club on a downward curve and Dennis Bergkamp was about the best gift he could have left for his successor Arsene Wenger.



Above Bruce Rioch on a pre-season tour of Scandinavia **Left** Bruce Rioch unveils new £7.5m signing Dennis Bergkamp in July 1995

"IT WAS AN AWKWARD MARRIAGE, BUT HE STABILISED A CLUB ON A DOWNWARD CURVE"



Above Joe Shaw, on the left of the shot, conversing with Tom Whittaker (seated), Jack Crayston (behind) and Miss Grover in Tom Whittaker's office in 1947

09 JOE SHAW
JANUARY – MAY 1934

Joe Shaw was only Arsenal's first team manager for four months on a caretaker basis. However, it proved to be possibly the most traumatic four months in the club's history as he stepped into the breach following the tragic and unexpected death of Herbert Chapman in January 1934. Shaw was Chapman's assistant alongside another of the club's long-term guardians Tom Whittaker and both men took over the management of the team immediately after Chapman's demise.

Shaw ably guided Arsenal to their third league title in 1933-34 under trying circumstances as a club mourned the loss of its greatest son and, in Shaw's case, his friend, colleague and mentor. Though Shaw's stint as manager was brief, his relationship with the club was anything but. He played for Woolwich Arsenal on over 300 occasions (never scoring a goal!) and enjoyed long-term stints as a first team and reserve coach and as a scout. He also became a club ambassador after retiring from coaching, eventually clocking up 49 years of service to the club.



08 BILLY WRIGHT
1962-1966

Billy Wright was appointed Arsenal manager in 1962 to much fanfare. Wright enjoyed a legendary playing career for Wolves and England, both of whom he captained with some distinction. The Gunners were still in their post-World War II slump with memories of their all-conquering 1930s team proving to be a significant burden on the club. Wright's appointment was supposed to catapult a floundering Arsenal back into the big time.

In truth, the appointment was not considered a great success. The Gunners finished 7th, 8th, 13th and 14th during his time at the club with most of his players suggesting that he was too nice a man to succeed as a coach. He couldn't extract the best from a talented squad. However, he did lay the foundation for the 1971 Double-winning team, with the signings of Frank McLintock and Bob Wilson and he brought future pillars of the team like Peter Storey, John Radford, Geordie Armstrong and Peter Simpson through the academy and into the first team. Much like Bruce Rioch after him, Wright's reign was not a success in its own right; but he left his successor Bertie Mee with the tools for future glories.





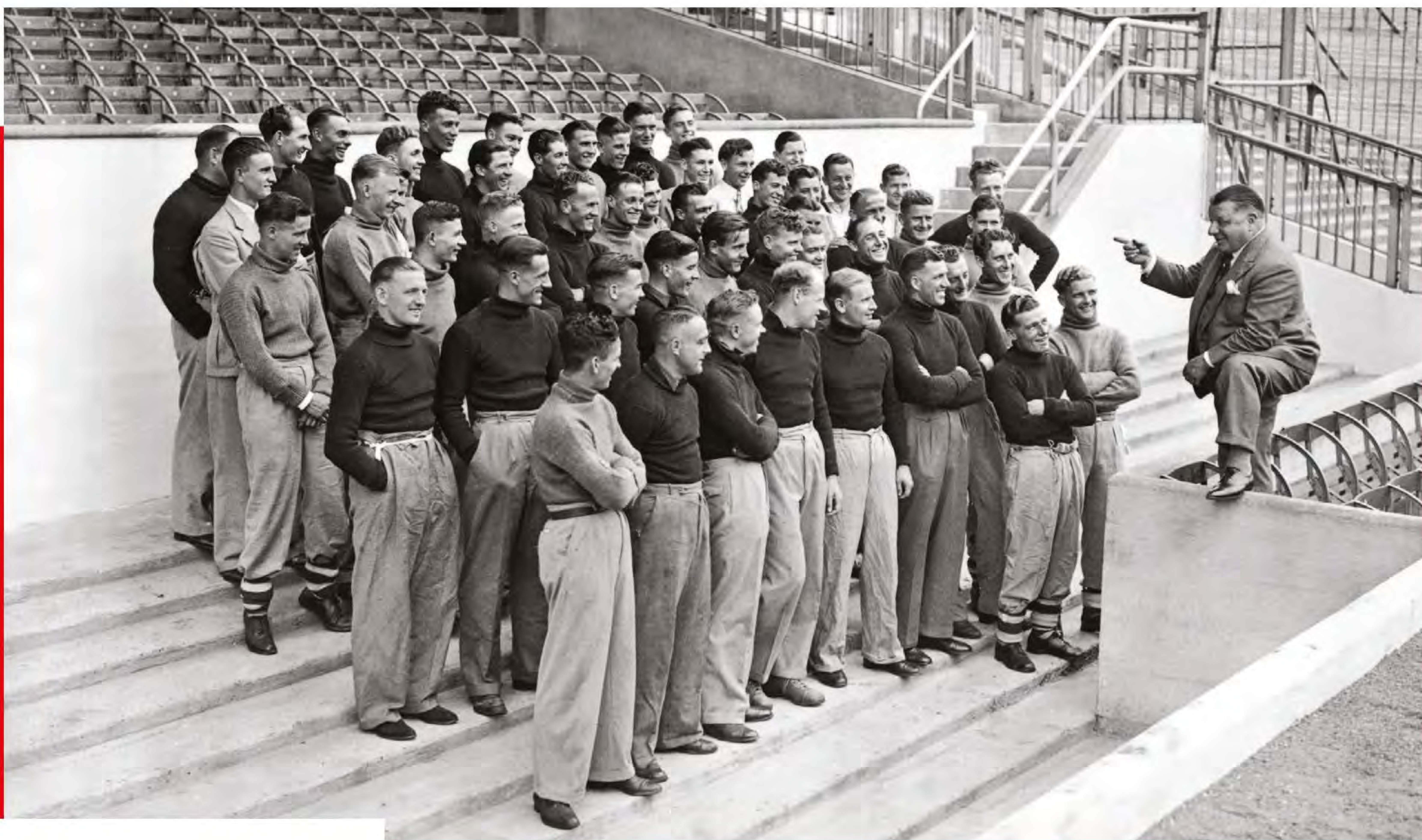
07 TERRY NEILL
1976-1983

Terry Neill spent 11 years as an Arsenal player between 1959 and 1970, however, when he was appointed to the manager's position in 1976, he had just spent two seasons in the managerial hotseat at White Hart Lane. The convivial Belfast-born coach spent seven years as manager, taking over from Double-winning manager Bertie Mee after the team began to slip down the table in the mid-'70s.

Arsenal never really mounted a successful title challenge under Neill's charge but they did become a very solid cup team again. They made the FA Cup Final in 1978 (when a virus ripped through the camp in the week leading up to the final and they lost to Ipswich), the legendary 'Five-minute Final' in 1979 which saw Arsenal squander a two-goal lead to Manchester United in the final five minutes of the match only to immediately score an 89th-minute winner. However, they lost the FA Cup Final to West Ham in 1980 and the Cup Winners' Cup Final on penalties to Valencia in the same year. Neill made stars of key talent from the club's academy, such as Liam Brady, Paul Davis and David O'Leary.

Clockwise from top left Billy Wright in his office, shortly after his appointment in May 1962; Billy Wright presents Tony Adams with his PFA Young Player of the Year award in 1987; Terry Neill as an Arsenal player in 1968; Terry Neill takes Arsenal training circa 1980

Images Ben Radford/Allsport/Getty Images (Rioch), Allsport UK/Getty Images (Rioch/Bergkamp), Popperfoto via Getty Images (Shaw), Central Press/Getty Images (Wright), Bob Thomas Sports Photography via Getty Images (Wright/Adams, Neill manager), Rolls Press/Popperfoto via Getty Images (Neill player)



06 GEORGE ALLISON
1934-1947

George Allison is Arsenal's second-longest-serving manager after Arsene Wenger, although seven of his 13 years in charge include World War II when no competitive football was played. Allison was the club's programme editor in the Woolwich Arsenal era and made his name as a journalist and broadcaster, before joining Arsenal's board of directors after World War I.

He was appointed as the full-time successor to Herbert Chapman in the summer of 1934 and, in truth, he largely kept a very successful team ticking over with Chapman's well-established ideas, winning league titles in 1935 and 1938 and an FA Cup in 1936.

As a former journalist, Allison also helped to raise the club's profile in the media and played a prominent part in the filming of the 1939 movie *The Arsenal Stadium Mystery.*

Above George Allison addressing his team during pre-season training **Below** Bertie Mee in his office in December 1970

Allison was not a rounded tactician, which stands to reason given that he had little background as a coach. Instead he trusted Chapman's sturdy wingmen Joe Shaw and Tom Whittaker to coach the team in the tactical sense. World War II broke that great team of the 1930s up and after a very trying season and a half post-war, Allison retired in 1947, with Tom Whittaker taking charge of team affairs. With two league titles and an FA Cup, Allison could look back on his spell in the dugout with satisfaction.



05 BERTIE MEE
1966-1976

After Billy Wright was relieved of his duties in 1966 and Arsenal continued to flounder, they decided to get radical with their next appointment – they appointed their physio Bertie Mee to the manager's position. Mee had no coaching background whatsoever but as an ex-army physio, he did have a reputation as an authoritarian. It was widely believed that Arsenal had a talented squad but Wright lacked the hard edges to really drill them into a unit. Mee had those hard edges, alright.

Arsenal appointed renowned coaches Don Howe and Dave Sexton onto the coaching staff to help make up for gaps in Mee's tactical knowledge. Together, they were able to knock a talented young team into shape. There were bumps in the road, not least an embarrassing League Cup Final

"MEE'S REIGN STARTED TO DECLINE AFTER THE DEPARTURE OF DON HOWE"

defeat to Third Division Swindon in 1969. But the Fairs Cup win over Anderlecht in 1970 broke the club's 17-year trophy hoodoo and laid the foundations for the historic Double-winning season in 1970-71. Mee's reign started to decline after the departure of Don Howe in 1971 and he retired in 1976, having broken up an exciting and gifted team too early and failed to replace outgoing stars like Charlie George and Ray Kennedy with comparable quality.

04 GEORGE GRAHAM
1986-1995

Graham was part of Bertie Mee's Double-winning squad, where his 'nonchalance' as a player earned him the nickname 'Stroller.' As a manager, he forged an entirely different reputation, however. Graham had done an excellent job with Millwall and was appointed by Arsenal in the summer of 1986 with a brief of ridding the club of its superstar culture. He inherited a talented squad of internationals but banished many, such as Charlie Nicholas, Graham Rix and Kenny Sansom, in favour of academy players and signings from the Football League. He ordered players to wear club blazers to games again, taking inspiration from the culture and values created by Bertie Mee.

A younger, hungrier outfit responded to Graham's strict regime where the famous back five of Seaman, Dixon, Winterburn, Bould and Adams (later joined by Keown) was one of his crowning achievements. He won the League Cup in 1987 and 1993, the Cup Winners' Cup in 1994 and the FA Cup in 1993. He also won league titles in 1989 and 1991, the former won with the final kick of the season at Anfield, surely the crowning moment in the club's history. He was sacked and banned from football for a year in 1995 for accepting a 'bung' during a transfer deal and, controversially, he later went on to manage Tottenham.



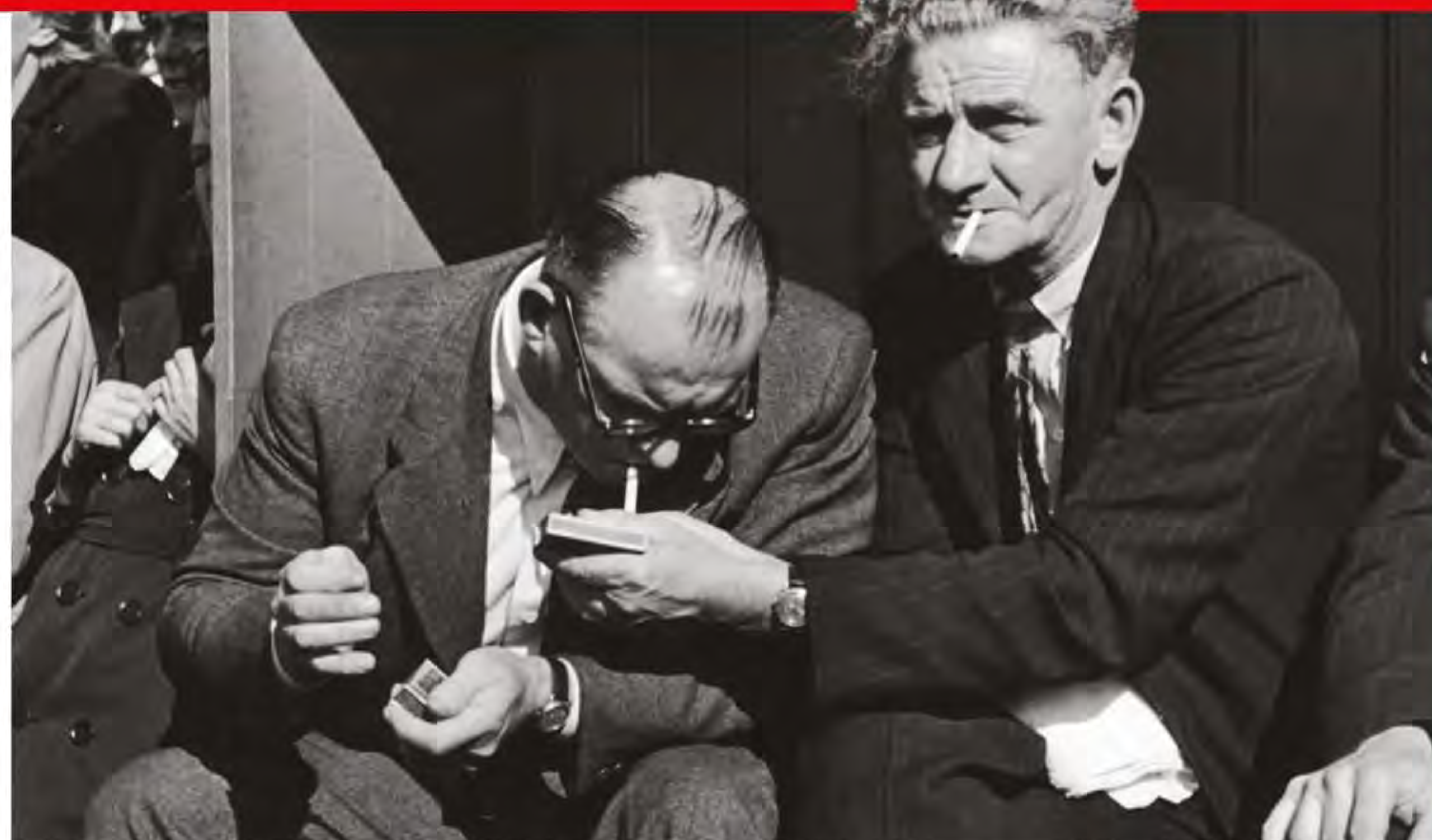


Right Graham with the championship trophy following Arsenal's win at Anfield in 1989
Left Arsenal fans unveil a banner as Graham returns as Spurs manager in November 1998

03 TOM WHITTAKER
1947-1956

Tom Whittaker had already been at Arsenal for 28 years as a player and coach before he was appointed to the manager's position in 1947. A trusted confidante of Herbert Chapman, his task was to keep Chapman's ideas coursing through the club's DNA. Whittaker took Chapman's legacy incredibly seriously, remarking upon his appointment, "Someone has to drive himself too hard for Arsenal. Herbert Chapman worked himself to death for this club and if that is my fate, I am happy to accept it." That is exactly what he did.

The club was severely financially damaged by the war effort and, by now, Chapman's team of stars had retired. Whittaker drove the club to another league title in 1947-48 and the FA Cup in 1950 with wily signings of experienced players like Joe Mercer and Ronnie Rooke. In 1953, Arsenal won the title on goal average by a tenth of a goal. But the toll of managing a club creaking under the weight of Chapman's legacy told on Whittaker's health. He died of a cardiac arrest in 1956 while still in office as Arsenal manager, aping the legacy of his mentor Chapman by dying on the job. Whittaker was an Arsenal employee for 36 years in total. It would be 1970 before Arsenal would win a trophy without Whittaker on staff.





Left Tom Whittaker's assistant Billy Milne lights a cigarette for the Arsenal gaffer
Below Left Tom Whittaker at the Marble Halls entrance in 1955

02 ARSENE WENGER

1996-2018

When a little-known French coach from Grampus Eight in Japan arrived at Highbury in 1996, the football world reacted with surprise and bafflement. Arsene Wenger's name was not well known in England but he would quickly etch his name into English football folklore. He quickly reinvented the team's defensive style into a mixture of ballet and street fighting, with a team that could ball and box with the best of them.

Introducing French native talent like Vieira, Henry and Pires into the team, Arsenal's swashbuckling style saw them become the main challengers to Manchester United's Premier League hegemony. Arsenal won the Double in Wenger's first full season in 1997-98, before repeating the trick in 2001-02. But his crowning glory was the 2003-04 campaign, which saw his side win the league without losing a single game, a feat only ever matched by Preston North End in 1889, who played 16 fewer league games in the process.

Wenger revolutionised the club and moulded it into his own image. The club's daring move from Highbury to Emirates Stadium in 2006 was largely driven by Wenger, as he sought to create a legacy to keep the club successful long after his tenure, which stretched to 22 years in total.

The investment of Chelsea and Manchester City and stadium debt made the second half of his reign tricky and, at times, tempestuous. However, he simply changed the face of the club, from top to bottom, turning Arsenal into a cosmopolitan global brand with a style of football admired the world over. Wenger was a football romantic who spawned a whole new generation of Arsenal fans that hung on his philosophical words. No figure in the club's history has exerted such influence over such a sustained period of time.



"WENGER SPAWNED A WHOLE NEW GENERATION OF ARSENAL FANS"

Main Wenger's Invincibles went unbeaten on their way to the 2003-04 title **Left** Wenger says goodbye to Arsenal fans at Huddersfield in May 2018 for his final game in charge

01 HERBERT CHAPMAN

1925-1934



Herbert Chapman had already won an FA Cup and two league titles with Huddersfield Town before accepting the challenge of taking over a middle-of-the-road London club in 1925. At that time, the North was very much the powerhouse of association football and Chapman was motivated by the challenge of bringing success to a team from the capital.

With his pioneering WM formation, adapted the world over for decades after he perfected it, he led Arsenal to league titles in 1931 and 1933, as well as an FA Cup in 1930 before unexpectedly dying of pneumonia in January 1934. Arsenal's subsequent league title wins in 1934, 1935 and 1938, as well as an FA Cup win in 1936 were all won by the team and the tactics he forged.

Chapman was a revolutionary as a coach, at a time when boards of directors often picked teams and tactics, Chapman insisted on taking full control of those aspects. He also encouraged player input into strategies and game plans. In fact, the move to WM came about after a heavy defeat to Newcastle in 1926 when veteran striker Charlie Buchan suggested moving a midfielder back into defence. With elite talent like Alex James, Cliff Bastin and Ted Drake, his Arsenal team was a supremely oiled machine.

His legacy stretched beyond the Marble Halls, however. He advocated for a pan-European competition years before it was conceived, he argued for floodlights, numbers on player shirts and tailored Arsenal's red shirt and white sleeves look so players could distinguish one another more easily. Chapman, a trained engineer, was also acutely aware of the spectator experience.

He was the brainchild of Highbury's palatial East and West Stands, which were world leading in spectator comfort when they were built in the 1930s. He argued that fans should not be taken for granted in the face of emerging sports like speedway. He even successfully lobbied to have Gillespie Road underground station renamed 'Arsenal' in 1932, a tremendously far-sighted piece of club branding.

Chapman is remembered as one of the greatest coaches and figures of all time in the UK, his ideas, both on and off the field, sped up the evolution of the sport. Former Arsenal chairman Peter Hill-Wood, whose grandfather Samuel was chairman during Chapman's reign, would say, "My grandfather said that he should have been Prime Minister." Chapman's legacy, forged in bronze in the Marble Halls entrance at Highbury and in front of the Clock End at Emirates Stadium, is simply unmatched at Arsenal.

"CHAPMAN'S ARSENAL TEAM WAS A SUPREMELY OILED MACHINE"





Above Chapman revolutionised Arsenal and football as a whole during his time at the club **Right** Herbert Chapman's statue peering over Emirates Stadium **Left** Chapman (bottom row left) with his 1932 Arsenal team

Images Stuart MacFarlane/Arsenal FC via Getty Images (Wenger trophy), Catherine Ivill/Getty Images (Wenger crowd), Daily Herald Archive/National Science & Media Museum/SSPL via Getty Images (Chapman portrait), James Lewis/Alamy (statue), James Jarche/Mirrorpix/Getty Images (1932)

FROM THE FFT ARCHIVES:
NOVEMBER 2020

WENGER SPEAKS OUT

His glittering tenure at Arsenal cemented a reputation among the all-time managerial greats, even if his latter seasons in North London weren't always so rosy. Thankfully, the Frenchman has plenty he's ready to reflect on after two soul-searching years away from his beloved Gunners

Words Chris Flanagan

Image Getty Images

In the depths of winter, everything started with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Arsene Wenger has broken into a chuckle, as he thinks back to what may well have been the most important game of his life.

This game did not take place on a football field, but inside a London house in January 1989. "We played charades," smiles Wenger, recalling the memory to *FourFourTwo*.

Back then, he was 39 years old, midway through his second season in charge of Monaco. His first had delivered the Ligue 1 title.

Les Monegasques were getting ready to play a European Cup quarter-final, so, during France's winter break, Wenger visited Turkey to scout opponents Galatasaray. Before his return to the Cote d'Azur, he fancied seeing a game in England. He phoned the agent of Glenn Hoddle, his star man at Monaco, who suggested an Arsenal fixture at Highbury. There, at half-time, Wenger met David Dein for the very first time.

The Gunners' vice-chairman invited him to dinner later that evening, at the home of a showbusiness friend, where a game of charades broke out. Wenger had to describe *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the William Shakespeare play written in the 16th century.

Given that charades originated in France, it probably shouldn't have been a surprise that he passed with flying colours. Dein was impressed by Wenger that night. Whether the Monaco coach realised it or not, his job interview to become Arsenal manager had begun – aided by a game in which he'd said nothing at all.

"It was an unusual test for a manager to be successful," laughs Wenger. "A musical group hosted us, and it was an interesting evening. I don't know how good I was at charades – I don't play any more now. But David always told me, 'I realised that night you were not stupid!'"

"YOU'RE KILLING YOUR CAREER"

Things could have turned out differently for the Frenchman, but for a pivotal 12 months early in his coaching career. Just a year before he won the league with Monaco, Wenger had been relegated.

He'd become a manager for the first time at 34, after a largely undistinguished playing career. Wenger grew up in a farming village in the Alsace region, near the German border, where tractors didn't even materialise until he was 14. He learned to milk cows, but soon became obsessed with football – developing a love for his local club, Strasbourg, and the great Real Madrid team of Alfredo Di Stefano and Ferenc Puskas.

As a teenager, Wenger was found to have a hollow at the top of his spine, thought to be caused by heaving heavy sacks of coal. Doctors warned him that he could be in a wheelchair by 40, but he still moved into amateur football, playing in midfield for Mutzig while studying economics at the University of Strasbourg. By 28, he'd worked his way up to boyhood club Strasbourg, in France's top division – although



Below Starting out as a midfielder with Strasbourg; before leading Monaco to French cup success

"GEORGE WEAH WON THE BALLON D'OR AND THEN INVITED WENGER ON STAGE TO HAND HIS OLD BOSS THE AWARD, SUCH HAD BEEN THE COACH'S INFLUENCE ON HIS CAREER"

he was a bit-part player when they became domestic champions in 1979, largely focusing on his role coaching the youth team.

In 1983, Wenger became first-team coach at Cannes, helping to create an academy that later brought through Zinedine Zidane and Patrick Vieira. A year later, he earned his first managerial job after being lured to Nancy by Aldo Platini, father of Michel. It was a club struggling to hang on to its place in the top tier of French football.

"I started in management by learning my job well, as I had to fight every year to stay in the league – we always had to sell our best players," says Wenger, speaking to *FFT* as he launches new book *My Life In Red and White*, the colours of every team he's ever managed.







Below Showing off his stylish threads alongside Hateley and Hoddle; with Weah; and as boss of Grampus Eight

Wenger guided Nancy to an encouraging mid-table finish in his first season, but a year later they only avoided the drop thanks to an end-of-season play-off against one of his former playing clubs, Mulhouse. In his third campaign, Nancy were relegated.

"It was a good humility teacher," explains Wenger. "If you start and you win straight away, you can think, 'Because it's me'. If you look in all the years since, Nancy have always been in the lower leagues – they play in the second division now. Their real potential was down at that level."

Thankfully, people in football understood the constraints that he'd been working under. Nancy tabled a new five-year contract, but offers arrived from Paris Saint-Germain and Monaco, who had expressed interest in his services a year earlier.

After moving to the Principality, Wenger needed only one season to make Monaco champions for the first time in six seasons – swiftly signing Hoddle and fellow Englishman Mark Hateley. That 12 months was arguably the most important of his career.

"I learned my job with Nancy – I learned what it is to have no huge potential, and to do your best with it," he continues. "For me, that always put things in perspective a bit, whenever I enjoyed success as a manager. But when I won the league the year after, that was important too, because I could see that I could do it."

Monaco were beaten 2-1 on aggregate by Galatasaray in their 1988-89 European Cup quarter-final, but reached the Cup Winners' Cup semis a year later, then the final of the same competition in 1992. Wenger brought through players like Emmanuel Petit, Lilian Thuram and Youri Djorkaeff, and made a star of George Weah – recruited from Cameroon club Tonnerre Yaounde for just £12,000.

In 1994, however, Monaco lost 3-0 to Milan in the Champions League semi-finals. Wenger began to ponder a departure from the Stade Louis II. The Marseille match-fixing scandal of 1993 had angered him deeply – Monaco's rivals were found to have bribed Valenciennes players in an end-of-season encounter, and, while not proven, more allegations surfaced relating to other matches. Wenger had lost trust in the integrity of the league – Monaco had finished as runners-up to l'OM in both 1991 and 1992.

Aware that he was unwilling to sign a new deal, Monaco fired Wenger after a bad start to the 1994-95 campaign. Soon, he accepted the position as manager of Japanese outfit Nagoya Grampus Eight.

"I had done 10 years in France and in the end it wasn't very enjoyable, so I felt it was a good time to go," he reveals. "On one hand, my passion for the game was so intense, and on the other hand, I also did this job to have experience of different cultures and different people. I've always had that curiosity in my life – to see how life was somewhere else."

But Wenger was joining a club who'd just finished second bottom of the J.League, in Gary Lineker's last season at Nagoya. Given the Frenchman wasn't short of admirers – he'd turned down an approach from Bayern Munich during his time at Monaco – moving to Japan was a huge risk.

"Many friends told me, 'You're killing your career', and they could have been right," he says. "I remember after two months there, Werder Bremen came to see me and said, 'Come and take over'. But I said, 'No, I've just started here, I can't move again'. It wasn't that I didn't want to do it, because you feel slightly homesick at the beginning, in such a different world. But I'm happy that I chose to stay there."

Wenger adapted to life in Japan, growing fascinated with sumo wrestling, and guided Grampus Eight to third in the table – earning him the J.League Manager of the Year award. Midway through 1996, they were challenging for the title when Arsenal came calling.

THE PURSUIT OF PERFECTION

Working in England had become an ambition for Wenger. In his late 20s, he'd travelled to Cambridge for a three-week course to boost his English language skills, hoping they might prove important one day. On another trip, he was enthralled when he saw his first match in the country.

"I always wanted to come to England," he says. "For my first experience there, I went to Liverpool against Manchester United with a friend of mine and Gerard Houllier. While I was watching, I thought, 'F**k's sake, it's so different here'. I had a shock, an emotional shock. I realised, 'Now I know why football was created here, in this country'. I said to myself, 'If I ever get an opportunity to work here, I want to take it'."

Ever since that night of charades in 1989, Wenger and David Dein had kept in touch. Dein visited the manager in Monaco on more than one occasion, and had recommended him for the Arsenal job in 1995. Chairman Peter Hill-Wood plumped for Bruce Rioch.

When Rioch's relationship with the board started to break down a year later, though, this time Dein got his wish. Hill-Wood and Dein met Wenger in Japan in June 1996 to finally agree a deal – weeks before Rioch was sacked. He knew he wanted to take the job.

"Yes, I had decided," he says. "At that time, my idea was to stay in Japan or go to a big English or European team – the year before, I didn't completely convince Peter Hill-Wood! But looking back with a distance now, I think Arsenal's choice was very brave."

Particularly given the furore that followed the Frenchman's appointment. 'Arsene who?' guffawed the *Evening Standard*'s headline. "I remember going to the training ground to tell all the players before it was announced," Dein later recalled. "I said to the boys, ▶

Images Getty Images, PA



'We've got a new manager starting here today – it's Arsene Wenger'. A voice from the back said, 'Who the f**k is that?'"

But Wenger's pedigree was much greater than most in England gave him credit for. That had been illustrated a year earlier when George Weah received the Ballon d'Or and promptly invited Wenger on stage to hand his former boss the prize, such had been the coach's influence on his career.

Wenger wasn't confirmed as the Gunners' gaffer until September 1996, as he waited for Grampus Eight to release him from his deal – but he'd already arranged the signings of both Patrick Vieira and Remi Garde a month earlier, while still in Japan. Vieira had been on the verge of joining Ajax having made just five senior outings for Milan, but Wenger was able to change the midfielder's mind.

When the manager arrived in England, he still couldn't officially take charge until the start of October, but headed into the dressing room at half-time of a UEFA Cup match at Borussia Monchengladbach and then decided to substitute captain Tony Adams, knowing Arsenal needed a goal to get through. It was a risky move with a wary squad, and it didn't work: Arsenal lost 6-4 on aggregate.

But the Gunners won his first official match in charge – Ian Wright netting twice in a 2-0 triumph at Blackburn – and began to respond to their new boss.

"I inherited a group of players who'd been serving the club for a while," says Wenger. "I took charge in October, and in the first six or seven months it was very clear what we needed to improve the team. I still knew the players in France well, which is not the case as much any more, but at the time I could see that because I'd worked at Monaco – so for instance there was Petit, who I brought in. Marc Overmars came from Ajax and Dennis

"EDU'S IN PRISON!"

In his autobiography, Wenger reveals the story behind two signings that did happen – and one that didn't

MIDNIGHT TALKS WITH SOL

When Arsenal recruited Sol Campbell from rivals Spurs in 2001, they had to be careful how they went about it. Wenger reveals they'd meet for talks at David Dein's house at 11pm, then walk around the neighbourhood until midnight while nobody was about, to keep things quiet. Campbell joined Arsenal on a free that summer.

PASSPORT WOES

The first time Edu arrived in England from Corinthians, the midfielder got held at Heathrow for unwittingly holding a fake passport. Compatriot Sylvinho phoned Wenger and said, "Edu's in prison!" Fearing the same might happen to Sylvinho, Wenger always stood next to the full-back at passport control during away trips.

THE (NON) RETURN OF RVP

Robin van Persie topped the Premier League goal chart in 2012, before finances forced Wenger to sell him to Manchester United. The Dutchman had early success at Old Trafford, but then found it difficult and asked Wenger if he could return. The boss said no – RVP was ageing and Arsenal were focusing on younger players.



Above Henry had to be convinced he could score goals for the Gunners... **Left** Signing Petit and Overmars in 1997 proved key

Bergkamp was already at Arsenal, so I found a good mixture between the long-serving players and the foreign ones."

Gaining his nickname of 'Le Professeur', Wenger attempted to transform his players' diet – to such an extent that they'd chanted "We want our Mars bars!" on the bus before that first match at Blackburn. His methods worked, though – after a third-place finish in 1996-97, Arsenal became Premier League champions in his first full campaign, before pocketing the FA Cup for good measure with a 2-0 victory over Newcastle.

"It's true that I did change their nutrition a little bit," he smiles. "The players had habits based on the nutritionist at Liverpool, who found out that players should eat chocolate before a game. But I didn't want that. It was funny because the long-serving players were all intelligent but over 30, so were real men. They'd grown up in a tough football world – when you won, you went down the pub! But they were clever, they were ready for a fight, and they were much better footballers than I'd thought from the outside."

He'd had no such doubts about the player who was pivotal to Wenger's second Premier League success, four years later. In fact, the person who initially had most doubts about Thierry Henry was the player himself, after arriving from Juventus in 1999.

"I gave starts to Thierry at Monaco when he was 17 years of age, and I played him as a centre-forward," explains Wenger. "After that, because David Trezeguet joined Monaco, he played on the wings and didn't score any goals. I always had in my mind that one day, this guy could play as a centre-forward for me. When I went to Juventus to see him, he played left-wing-back and wasn't very good – because he was anything but a wing-back. They wanted to send him on loan to Udinese.

"But we reached an agreement – Juventus wanted to buy Nicolas Anelka and we were really close to exchanging him with Thierry, plus £15 million for us. Anelka wanted to go to Real Madrid, however, so we still bought Thierry and I played him upfront, I think from November onwards. At the start, he thought he couldn't score goals. But when they came, he never stopped."

Henry plundered 228 goals for Wenger, to become the Gunners' all-time leading scorer. Arsenal didn't lose an away match en route to the title in 2002 – another Double-winning campaign after defeating Chelsea 2-0 in the FA Cup final – and went unbeaten for the last 21 league fixtures.

In 2002-03, Wenger publicly declared his aim to go the entire league season without a loss. His hopes were dashed in match 10, when Wayne Rooney announced himself to the world with a stunning 90th-minute goal at Goodison Park.

Arsenal lost six times that season, finishing second to Manchester United. Players told Wenger that by revealing the target to avoid defeat, he'd put too much pressure on them.

"That's true," he says. "It just shows you sometimes – and the media know it so well – that when you're too ambitious and you don't achieve your ambition, you feel stupid and humiliated. But you shouldn't be scared to put high ambitions into the brains of people."

One season later, Wenger's ambition was realised – the Gunners went unbeaten for the entire league campaign, as the Frenchman bagged his third Premier League crown. That side will forever be known as the Invincibles, and one of the greatest teams in the history of English football.

"For me, it was my big dream in life to do that, because I felt there wasn't much room to do better," he continues. "It shows that you prepared very well for every single game. It's not easy. In France, Paris Saint-Germain are ahead of everybody, but they've never won the title without losing a game. In 2004, we managed to do it.

"I'd told the players that you can become immortal by achieving that goal. I knew that usually when you win a championship, you lose the match straight after that because concentration isn't the same any more, and everything is a bit loose. But the fact that we didn't give up, that I'd put these ingredients in their heads, helped a lot. It convinced me that the mental impact can be so important. When we did it, I was very proud because it was a deep dream."

ROMAN'S GOT HIS TANK OUT

Wenger has won many trophies in his career, and even has a space rock named after him: asteroid 33179 Arsenewenger is between three and nine kilometres in diameter, and orbits between Mars and Jupiter.

But European prizes proved more elusive than extraterrestrial ones. In all three major continental competitions, Wenger suffered defeat in finals – to Werder Bremen in the Cup Winners' Cup with Monaco in 1992, to Galatasaray in the UEFA Cup with Arsenal in 2000, and to Barcelona in the Champions League with Arsenal in 2006.

He has never been able to watch back the footage of that Stade de France showpiece, when Barça came from a goal down to win 2-1 late on after Jens Lehmann's early red card. Until then, the North Londoners hadn't conceded a goal in the knockout phase that season, having ousted Real Madrid, Juventus and Villarreal to reach Paris.

In his list of achievements, Wenger admits continental glory is the main thing missing. "Yes, the European trophy," he says. "I never cared much about the UEFA Cup or Europa League, but I truly miss not having won the Champions League. I left a knowledge behind me at Arsenal that is there, after nearly two decades of continuous Champions League presence – they've never won it and I hope they do one day. When I arrived, they'd only ▸

"WHEN I HAD HENRY, I COULD HAVE SIGNED RONALDO – IMAGINE WHAT THEY COULD HAVE DONE TOGETHER? IT MAKES YOU SWEAT A BIT. I THOUGHT IT WAS ALL DONE"

Images PA

played a few Champions League matches in their history. Then in the last years, we were always playing Barcelona or Bayern and I felt the draw was a bit too predictable.

"But you know, it remains a regret – a big regret, especially when we were so close. We were 30 minutes away. My biggest regret is that we had to play with 10 men. You go into the final, and you haven't conceded a goal against Real Madrid with Zidane, Beckham and Ronaldo, or Juventus with Ibrahimovic and Trezeguet. Then suddenly, after just 10 minutes, you have to play with one man less. It was hard to swallow and it still is today – but it's part of life."

For Barça, that Champions League final was the start of a great era. For the Gunners, it was effectively the end of one. From that moment onwards, life became more difficult for Wenger at Arsenal. The club left Highbury for the Emirates Stadium that summer, and were constantly fighting a financial battle to fund the move. Meanwhile, crosstown rivals Chelsea were spending big money – at the time, David Dein said that Blues chief Roman Abramovich "has parked his Russian tanks on our lawn, and is firing £50 notes at us".

In his autobiography, Wenger explains that the banks sought a guarantee that Arsenal would spend only 50 per cent of their budget on salaries. New signings had to be funded by player sales. "It was very difficult," he tells *FFT*, "because the first generation of players played until the end of their careers – Steve Bould, Lee Dixon and Nigel Winterburn. The second generation, I sold at the age of 30 or 32. The third generation, I sold at 21, 22, 23 and 24. That means that you sell them for other clubs to be competitive against you."

Arsenal's move to the Emirates came not long after Leeds' descent into financial ruin. The Frenchman was never going to risk the long-term health of the club, though. "No, because what's important is that the club is in a position today where it can invest, and it's in a healthy situation," he says. "We had no support from anyone – we had to buy the land for £120m, build the new stadium and then pay it back.

"It was extremely difficult but I accepted the challenge, and I'm proud to have served the club with total commitment and integrity. That doesn't mean I didn't make mistakes, but it was completely to help the club come through that period. You see now that Spurs are going through that period as well – they have fewer resources."

Would he have won more league titles at Arsenal if the Gunners hadn't left Highbury? "I don't know," he admits. "Chelsea came in and spent a lot of money, and with 38,000 fans we could not have competed with them financially. Manchester City came in, United had more financial power, you had Liverpool who had financial power, you had Tottenham – and at the time I joined Arsenal, Newcastle were a strong team. So I'm not sure. I believe that phase could have been better for us if we had met another Thierry Henry – like Cristiano Ronaldo, if he'd signed for us."



Above Heartbreak in Paris: "I truly miss not having won the Champions League"

Over the years, the Gunners missed out on a variety of big names they'd shown interest in – among them Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Luis Suarez, Gerard Pique, Vincent Kompany, Yaya Toure, Raphael Varane, Jadon Sancho and even Lionel Messi. Some of them even began rhyming with each other, like Didier Drogba and Paul Pogba.

But it's the failure to seal a deal for Ronaldo that Wenger reveals he rues the most, given how close he came. The Portugal star was 17 when he headed to London for contract talks back in January 2003.

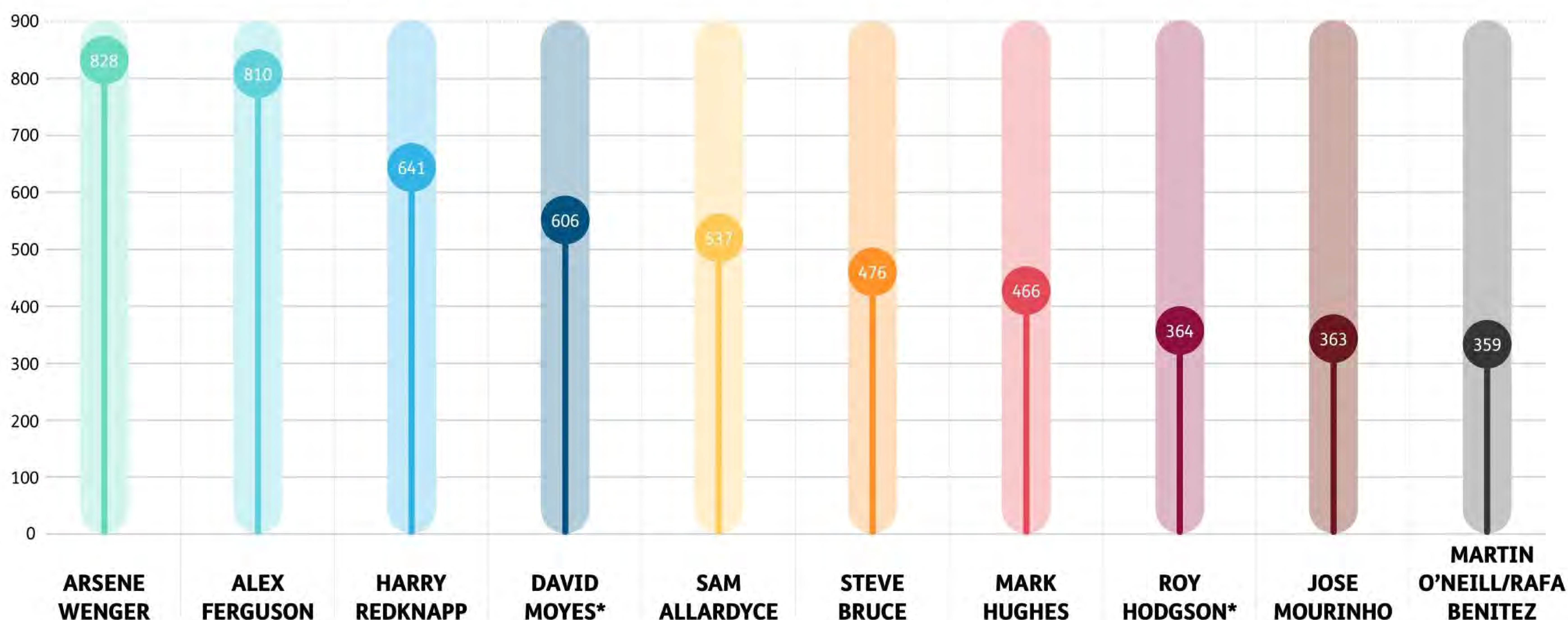
"When I had Thierry, I could have signed Ronaldo – can you imagine what they could have done together?" he says. "That makes you sweat a little bit, and I was very close to doing it. I thought it was all done. Football is down to top-class players; decisive players who make you win. The higher the level, the more the individual becomes key. Contrary to what people think, at the top level it's the individual player who makes the difference.

"It was that close," he adds, holding his index finger and thumb within a millimetre of each other, to illustrate just how narrowly he missed out on Ronaldo. "But I would say that every club could tell you stories like that."

Arsenal could not agree a transfer fee with Sporting, and Manchester United swooped. Ronaldo helped to deliver them three more Premier League titles.

Given the difficulties Wenger faced, some bosses might have walked away. He certainly had opportunities. Asked how many offers he received during his time at Arsenal, he puffs out his cheeks and pauses to think. "At least 10," he says. "Maybe 12 or 15." Which was the most tempting? "For me, it was especially difficult to turn down Real Madrid because it was a huge club," he says. "I'm not sure that

MOST PREMIER LEAGUE MATCHES MANAGED



*Correct to January 31, 2022

coaches who worked with limited resources like I did would turn down Madrid."

But despite an admiration for Los Blancos that stemmed back to childhood, he says he was never close to actually accepting their offers, which came more than once. "No," he stresses. "I always felt that I had committed to my challenge. I pushed the club to build the new stadium and I wanted them to do it. I was guiding them through a very sensitive period. Of course the first period was more glamorous, but we managed to remain in the Champions League for almost 20 years with fewer resources than people around us.

"I think that was the period when I worked the hardest, maybe the best. But when you have such a big period in front of you, people don't want to see that. They want to continue having the same results."

In his book, Wenger also names Juventus, PSG, Bayern, France and England among the teams who were keen to acquire his services, and explains how he could have doubled or tripled his salary by leaving. In the media, he was linked with Manchester City and United, too. Did they ever approach him? "City never, United yes – I cannot tell you exactly when!" he shares with a smile. It was said to be when Sir Alex Ferguson nearly retired in 2002.

He says he could never have contemplated moving to Old Trafford, though. "No, because I was at Arsenal," he insists. "You know, I had a real love story with Arsenal. My life is red and white. I felt when I came to the club that there was this special charm inside it. It was a good mixture between respect for tradition, respect for people, and not being scared to sometimes face unpopular judgements.

"Really, it was the love of my life, this club. I meet so many people now who love Arsenal – for the trophies we won, of course, because when you have a child of about 10 years old who saw us, the Invincibles, they became an Arsenal fan. But also they love the club for the values it represented."

"MY BIGGEST REGRET IS THAT WE HAD TO PLAY WITH 10 MEN AGAINST BARÇA, HAVING NOT CONCEDED AGAINST REAL OR JUVE. IT WAS HARD TO SWALLOW AND STILL IS"

Wenger's love for Arsenal made it all the more painful when criticism began to build, from an ever-increasing section of the club's own fanbase. "Completely honestly, I wasn't happy to be criticised, but I could understand it as well," he says. "After a while, supporters want something new and different. Criticism isn't nice because you think you're doing the maximum, but crowds are like that. They live in the moment. When you lose, people don't want to know how long you've been there and what you've done for the club."

In the latter years of his career at Arsenal, Wenger would frequently take everything on his shoulders. A perception grew that Arsenal had cash to splash, and Wenger was simply not splashing it. At the time, he largely opted not to dispel that notion. Was that money actually there to spend, or was he protecting the board by staying quiet?

"I was protecting the board and the club," he says now. "More the club than the board, because I feel when you're the manager, you represent the club – and the board of course, indirectly. I didn't need to be protected – it was my job to protect the club.

"It was a sensitive period, but we managed to stay in the top four. In 2016, we finished second in the league behind Leicester – 2017 was the first time that we didn't qualify for the Champions League, but we got 75 points and won the FA Cup."

That victory over Chelsea was his seventh FA Cup triumph, three of them secured in ▸

Below Celebrating Double joy in 1998; and becoming the Invincibles in 2004



Images PA

his challenging final years at the club. As a lad growing up in France, he'd avidly watched the FA Cup final on television. Wenger's record in the competition is something he will always be immensely proud of.

"I am, because it's the biggest competition in the world, and no one has won the trophy more times than me," he beams. "No one has lifted it seven times, and there have been so many great managers in England."

INTO THE UNKNOWN

Near the end, barely a week passed without debate about Wenger's future. He prepared for the 2017 FA Cup final knowing he wasn't contracted for the following season, but his intentions were made pretty clear a month beforehand. "Retirement is dying," he told a press conference. After so many years at the club, he confesses that he was scared of what his life would be like without Arsenal.

"Yes, I was," he says. "Because seven days a week, every minute of my life was guided on that – then suddenly, nothing, empty. It's an adjustment that can even be dangerous physically for your health. When you've got such a commitment that I had, then nothing at all, believe me that's not easy."

Three days after Alexis Sanchez and Aaron Ramsey fired Arsenal to FA Cup final glory at Wembley, Wenger penned a new two-year deal. Around mid-April the following season, though, the Gunners lay sixth in the Premier League, 14 points off the Champions League spots. With discontent increasing once more, it was announced that the manager would step down at the end of the campaign, after 22 years at the helm.

In his book, there is a notable absence of detail regarding how that decision came to be made, and what discussions took place inside the club prior to the announcement. "I prefer to be private about that, because it would not be too nice for the club," he says, when asked by *FFT*.

He writes, however, of some hostility from "a section of the fans and the board", adding that "if it had been up to me, I would have stayed until my contract expired". Reports at the time suggested that the club might have encouraged him to walk away. Was that how it happened?

"Not exactly, no," he says. "But you know, I want to keep what was good. I will love this club until the last day of my life. Every time I see a red and white shirt, I will support it."



Above In his new FIFA role, Wenger wants to improve the pathway for young players all around the world

Wenger's farewell tour would last for seven games. Nine days after the announcement, he took his Arsenal team to Old Trafford for the last time. There, he was met pre-match by Sir Alex Ferguson, who presented him with a gift. It was a touching finale to one of the Premier League's great rivalries – in his book, Wenger reveals that 14 years earlier, the pair had engaged in a shoving match at the same stadium, after Manchester United brought Arsenal's 49-game unbeaten run to an end.

"WHEN ARSENE KISSED SAGNA, IT WAS PERFECT"

Lifelong Gunners fan Andrew Mangan, the man behind Arseblog, lists his top three Wenger moments



1 IN THE OLD TRAFFORD CROWD

"Wenger's arrival in England clearly threatened Sir Alex Ferguson. At the peak of their powers, two brilliant managers tried to outdo each other season after season, creating the most intense rivalry I can recall as an Arsenal supporter. Those matches were always stomach-churningly intense, but Arsene held his own against Fergie. When he was sent off at Old Trafford in 2009, he stood among the United fans with his arms outstretched. An iconic Wenger image."



2 ON STAR MAN BOWIE

"I was a huge David Bowie fan, and Wenger had an ability to comment on all kinds of things – not just football. It wasn't that uncommon for him to be asked about topics which had nothing to do with the game. After Bowie died in 2016, he stated, 'The message he gave to my generation was very important, because it was after the Second World War and was basically, "Be strong enough to be yourself." That's a very strong message, and very important for my generation too'."



3 SAGNA GETS A SMOOCH

"Arsenal won the 2014 FA Cup Final in the most Arsenal way possible – a nine-year trophy drought ended by an injury-time win over Hull, after going 2-0 behind. At the final whistle, Bacary Sagna knelt down and clenched his fists. As he did so, Wenger kissed the top of his head. It just felt like a perfect moment after so long without success. Winning that cup seemed to de-age Arsene, who'd looked as if the weight of the world was on his shoulders. It was a big relief for him."





"I WILL LOVE THIS CLUB UNTIL THE LAST DAY OF MY LIFE. EVERY TIME I SEE A RED AND WHITE SHIRT, I WILL SUPPORT IT"

Top Bidding adieu to the Emirates – he plans to return soon **Above** Fergie "could be excessive, and so could I... but slowly respect dominates"

"It was very tense in the corridor that day, because it was a match that was difficult to swallow," Wenger says now. "We were both very competitive and very aggressive, and he could be excessive. I could be excessive too, so for a while it was tense. But then slowly, as ever in life, you put things into perspective and respect dominates after that. When he made that presentation to me, I felt it was the end of a story of two people who fought hard for their clubs – it showed that fierce competition had been replaced by respect."

Jose Mourinho, then United boss, joined the presentation, too. The Portuguese manager had previously aimed notable jibes at Wenger – labelling him a "voyeur" and a "specialist in failure" – but the Frenchman insists their relationship is better today. "I believe things have calmed down," he smiles. "We're not in competition any more."

Wenger's Arsenal goodbye was naturally moving – for all Gunners fans, and particularly for the man himself. "It was very emotional, and we had a really nice evening after that with my friends," he recalls.

"It was difficult for me afterwards. I've had good discipline in my life and I've continued to watch football like I was still in the game, but you were inside the club every day, inside something that was happening, and then you are outside of it. I don't want to complain, but for any person anywhere in the world, it's an adjustment that's not easy when you've been involved so much."

For two years, Wenger has resisted going back for a match – partly out of respect for those trying to take the club forward without him, eager not to cast a shadow. But having been so heavily involved in the move from Highbury to the Emirates, helping to guide the Gunners' plans as they took shape, he's contemplating a visit.

"I have still not returned," he says. "Every stand, I was there to build with the architect, and the pitch, so one day I'll have to go there and touch it. There are two buildings in my life which are very important. Highbury – the listed wall where I sometimes went – and of course the Emirates, because it's been a big part of my life. It was 2006 when we moved there, and we're in 2020 now. The club have invited me to go back for a match. I thought I'd keep a distance at the start, but after two years, maybe it's time to return."

Current boss Mikel Arteta spent five years under Wenger as a player – lifting the FA Cup as captain in 2014 – and has expressed his gratitude for the advice he's received from his former manager since taking over.

"I've spoken to Mikel once and encouraged him," says Wenger. "It seems to me that he has a grip on the team, and that they have corrected their weaknesses by recruiting the right players. Let's hope we can get back to where we belong this season – that means to the top four."

In November 2019, Wenger took up a new role as head of global football development at FIFA, splitting his time between London, Paris and Zurich. His aims include improving the pathway for youngsters in all countries, so that no matter where they hail from, they have the same chance to make it in football.

He's also eager to create a research centre in Zurich, focusing on the enhancement of teaching methods, the laws of the game and development of technological metrics. It's very on-brand for Le Professeur, a man who incorporated data analysis into his methods at the start of his coaching career, when it was pretty much unheard of.

Since departing Arsenal, Wenger has been approached over a return to management – and publicly declared his interest in doing so if the right offer came along. But that hasn't happened yet, and he's increasingly uncertain whether it ever will – he turned 71 not long after this interview.

"There is a chance that I may not return," he concedes. "I've had a few offers – I didn't count them, but I've had offers in England, offers in France. I didn't do it because I felt like I needed to take some distance with it. Do I finish with Arsenal? I managed 1,235 matches for them, plus 12 or 13 years before that. I still have the passion and I still would want to, but when I'm offered the challenge I reply, 'No, thank you'. Something is holding me back. I don't know what that is – maybe I feel, 'Don't make one fight too many'.

"With FIFA, I create academies online, and I'm creating a research lab – we have a very sophisticated computer analysis of the game that I want to set up, so I'm staying informed. That's where I stand at the moment – I want to put that in place at FIFA. If I still have the hunger to manage afterwards, I'll do it. But right now, I don't like to start something and not finish it."

Whether he returns or not, his status as one of the greatest managers in history is secure.

"I believe my legacy is that I tried to win, and win with style – to give moments in life to the people who come to the stadium," he reflects. "When you're a supporter, you want to come to a stadium and really experience something that takes you out of your hard daily life – because no matter what our work is, daily life is difficult. I wanted to give them a special moment in their life.

"I believe we played some fantastic games, even from 2006-18. Those moments when you go and see a team play fantastic football, they're not only linked with the titles you win. They're also linked with all the moments you share with your friends, when you feel free. For me, those moments are forever."

Wenger created moments that Arsenal fans will remember for the rest of their lives. Fifty years from now, people will still speak about the great Invincibles team of 2003-04, and the rest of that remarkable era.

It all started with that game of charades, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Thanks to Wenger, Arsenal's dreams became reality.

MORE ON FOURFOURTWO.COM

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• Quiz: Can you name all seven of Wenger's FA Cup-winning Arsenal XIs?

• Year Zero: the 1999-00 season that made Thierry Henry at Arsenal *(by Joe Brewin)*

ROCKY

FROM THE FFT ARCHIVES:
APRIL 2021

David Rocastle wasn't just a fantastic footballer – to those within Highbury's hallowed Marble Halls, the Lewisham maestro represented something much greater. *FFT* celebrates the life and career of a Gunners hero with those who knew him best, two decades on from his tragic passing aged only 33

Words Gavin Newsham

Image Shutterstock

David Dein has a coffee table in his study. At first glance, it's an unremarkable piece of furniture. Have a butcher's underneath, however, and you will notice something unusual propping up the simple square of mahogany. There, dressed in Arsenal socks and shorts, are a pair of actual legs. These are no ordinary appendages, either – they are life-size replicas of David 'Rocky' Rocastle's.

Dein's table was a present from wife Barbara. Knowing how much her husband admired the Arsenal midfielder, she had also bought him a new wallet with a photograph of Rocastle inside, rather than one of, say, her or their children.

"As a member of the Arsenal board and in a position where you shouldn't really have favourites, Rocky was unquestionably mine," the former vice-chairman tells *FourFourTwo*.

But then again, David Rocastle always had that effect on people.

March 31, 2021, marked 20 years since Rocastle passed away after a battle with non-Hodgkin lymphoma, an aggressive variant of cancer which affects the immune system, aged just 33. Ask anyone who knew him and they all offer the same opinion without exception: not only was he an extraordinary player but, more than that, he was also an exceptional human being. Rocastle's famous ethos was simple: "Remember who you are, what you are and who you represent."

Born in the London Borough of Lewisham, Rocastle was brought up in Brockley on the same Honor Oak estate as friend and future teammate, Ian Wright. When Rocastle was five, his father Leslie died from pneumonia aged just 29, leaving mother Linda to bring up her five children. David, as the oldest, was now the man of the household, and he had to grow up pretty quickly.

"He was our role model and we all looked up to him," his brother Steve explains to *FFT*. "He always had our back."

At school, Rocastle was a model student. Although he thought about becoming a PE teacher one day, it was clear that his gift for football would take him in another direction. He soon found his weekends taken up by representing local club Vista, then Lewisham Way – a club set up specifically to give young black boys from the local housing estates an opportunity to play.

Nominally a central midfielder, Rocastle's obvious talent meant he could play anywhere on the pitch. "It was hard to pin him down," says Steve Rocastle. "If they were winning, Dave would be upfront, trying to score more. If it was tight he would drop back, making sure they didn't concede. I know I'm biased, but he could do it all."

Word started to spread about the boy from Brockley. He was offered a trial at Millwall, but the Lions declined to sign him. Instead, Arsenal scout Terry Murphy was impressed by Rocastle's boundless energy and balletic grace on the ball, and eventually persuaded Gunners boss Terry Neill to offer him a place in the club's academy.

Dein, meanwhile, first saw Rocastle play for the youth team a year later, in 1983.

"I remember coming home excitedly from the match and telling all my family, 'I've just been watching the nearest thing to a Brazilian footballer you're ever likely to see – and he comes from Lewisham!'" chuckles the former Gunners chief.

Arsenal striker Charlie Nicholas had also seen the teenager in action and subsequently frogmarched him over to his agent, Jerome Anderson, for a chat.

"In walked this kid with a big afro, maybe 15 years old, and Charlie said to me, 'I want you to look after this young man as if he was your son – he's a special player and a special person'," Anderson recalls to *FFT*. "Knowing he had lost his dad at such a very young age, I took it upon myself to do whatever I could to help him."

They became friends, and in time, Rocastle would even jokingly call Anderson 'dad' as he helped to negotiate his first professional contract with Arsenal. That day, in December 1984, Anderson had met Rocastle outside Arsenal tube station before heading across the road to Highbury.

"He was just like any little boy fulfilling his dream," reminisces Anderson. "The contract was peanuts – I'd be surprised if it was £200 a week. But it wasn't about the money, it was about the opportunity. 'You do the business,' I said, 'and the money will look after itself'."

Below Rocky on the rampage in a 1986 triumph over West Ham **Bottom** He was always smiling; particularly after sinking Spurs in the 1987 League Cup semi-finals

"YOU SEE CRISTIANO RONALDO'S STEPOVERS, YET ROCKY WAS DOING 20 A GAME DURING HIS PRIME – IT DROVE GEORGE GRAHAM MAD"







Rocastle didn't have to wait very long for his first-team bow. Aged 18, he lined up against Newcastle at Highbury in September 1985, and although the game ended goalless, the teenager made enough of an impression to make 26 league appearances in his maiden season. He had everything. Yes, Rocastle was naturally strong and capable of bulldozing his way past opponents, but he was also blessed with a rare touch and an array of skills that infuriated some of his managers.

"You watch Cristiano Ronaldo's stepovers, yet Rocky was doing 20 a game in his prime," former teammate Perry Groves tells *FFT*. "It drove George Graham mad."

Rocastle could mix it as well. Tough in the tackle and possessed with what Tony Adams called "thighs like tree trunks", he was in the midst of the infamous brawl at Manchester United in October 1990 for which both sides were docked points. "We went in there and stuck up for each other," stated Rocastle. "At the Arsenal, we never, ever started any brawls – we just finished them."

Rocastle landed his first winners' medal in the 1987 League Cup Final, as Arsenal beat Liverpool 2-1 at Wembley. It was his display in the semi-final against arch enemy Spurs, however, that secured his place in Gunners folklore. Having lost the first leg at Highbury 1-0, Arsenal conceded in the return clash at White Hart Lane but rallied to win 2-1 and force a replay three days later. Again, Arsenal trailed to Clive Allen's opener, but pulled level in the 82nd minute courtesy of Ian Allinson. Then it happened: with extra time looming, Rocastle slid home a memorable clincher to send the travelling mob wild.

FROM ECSTASY TO AGONY

By the 1988-89 season, Rocastle was in the form of his life – ever-present in the wondrous campaign which came down to one heady Friday night at Anfield.

That week, as the nation braced itself for a nail-biting title decider Arsenal had to win by two clear goals, Rocastle visited his agent. "He was completely unfazed," says Anderson. "He looked me straight in the eye and said, 'We're going to win. It'll be 0-0 at half-time, we'll score early in the second half and we'll win by two clear goals'. He was convinced."

But everything was stacked in Liverpool's favour. Kenny Dalglish's side were unbeaten since New Year's Day, hadn't lost by two goals at Anfield in three years, had just lifted the FA Cup against Everton and had the public's affection only six weeks after Hillsborough.

Rocastle felt the Gunners had their rivals' number after a hat-trick of narrow League Cup third round meetings earlier that season.

"Rocky was unplayable in the first game at Anfield and smacked one in the top corner – a proper worldie," says Groves.

"I remember him telling everyone after the game that we were the better team and had nothing to fear."

He was right. Eight minutes into the second half of the title decider, Rocastle was fouled by Ronnie Whelan 40 yards out. His reaction to the high boot wasn't anger or frustration, though – quite the opposite.

"You can just see the sheer determination in those steely eyes of his," continues Groves. "He raises both fists – you can see how much he wants it."

Sure enough, the Gunners scored from the free-kick as Alan Smith glanced home Nigel Winterburn's centre. Up for grabs as Michael Thomas secured an improbable 2-0 victory in injury time, Rocastle's prophecy had come to pass. The following morning, when most Arsenal players were nursing post-celebratory ▸



Below Mixing it in the infamous 1990 fisticuffs at Old Trafford

Images all PA, except Getty Images (top)

sore heads, Rocastle turned up at his mum's house, bag in hand, like it was just another day. "We were all beside ourselves but it was like nothing had happened for him," says his brother Steve. "He had his dinner and carried on as normal."

However, just as it seemed everything was going Rocastle's way, a knee injury late in the 1989-90 campaign halted his momentum – especially on the international front. Rocastle had earned his first senior call-up – after 14 appearances and two goals for the under-21s – alongside Des Walker and Paul Gascoigne in September 1988, when Bobby Robson picked the 21-year-old to play in a friendly against Denmark at Wembley. He quickly became a mainstay, playing in all but one of England's six qualifiers for Italia 90.

The Three Lions advanced to the World Cup unbeaten, but Rocastle's injury threatened his hopes of featuring in Robson's final 22-man squad. He returned in late April, and scored a second-half winner off the bench against Southampton in his third game back. Sweeter still, Robson was watching on at Highbury. "I saw Bobby in the car park after the match, and he reassured me that as long as Rocky was fit, he'd be one of the first names on his list," says Anderson.

The squad announcement now imminent, Rocastle headed to Singapore with Arsenal alongside two more England hopefuls: Alan Smith and Tony Adams.

"We hadn't been there long when all three of us were summoned back to join a 26-man provisional squad, four of whom would later be culled," Smith explains to *FFT*. "We'd had a few days' training when Bobby stopped me and Tony on the way to breakfast and told Tony, face to face, he wasn't going. But me and Rocky had to wait for the team flipchart meeting to discover our fate. Rocky was very unlucky not to go. We certainly had a good moan about it that summer."

"It really annoyed him – and me," laments Groves. "Rocky was in great form for club and country, so to miss out in the way he did just made no sense whatsoever. I remember him saying, 'What's happened?'"

Instead, Rocastle watched the tournament at Anderson's house as England came within a whisker of reaching the final. It changed the lives of midfielders Gascoigne and David Platt – yet Gazza had only played twice during qualifying, and Platt not at all.

"To say Dave was disappointed about that is an understatement," adds brother Steve. "He felt it wasn't fair. I don't know if it was an Arsenal thing, but for all three players to miss out a year after they'd won the title? It didn't make any sense."

Rocastle would never get to play at a major international tournament, but did claim his 14 caps without experiencing defeat. His final England appearance came two weeks after his 25th birthday, when he took on Brazil at Wembley in a friendly best remembered for Gary Lineker scuffing a penalty and spurning the chance to tie Bobby Charlton's record as the Three Lions' joint-top goalscorer.

The knee injury that had all but cost Rocky his place in England's World Cup squad soon







Top On England B duty with the Arsenal bunch **Above** Helping the Three Lions reach Euro 92; prior to sealing Charity Shield glory at Leeds

"TO SEE WHAT THAT DISEASE HAD DONE TO HIM WAS FRIGHTENING. YOU THINK, 'OF ALL THE PEOPLE IN THE WORLD, WHY ROCKY?'"

proved an issue at Arsenal, too. An operation to resolve it hadn't really worked, and while Rocastle's trademark touch and technique remained, he wasn't as mobile. It limited him to a paltry 18 league outings in the 1990-91 season as Arsenal won the First Division title again, losing just once. Arsenal boss Graham, however, was hell-bent on evolution. Twelve months after that second title in three years, Rocastle was now surplus to requirements. The Scot ushered his midfielder into his white BMW at London Colney.

"I'd parked out of the way because I was late and didn't want to catch the manager's eye, but as I walked over I noticed Rocky sat in the gaffer's car," recalls Groves.

"I thought he must be getting a bollocking, but as I got closer I could see that Rocky was in tears. At the time, I thought it might have been a personal reason. It didn't occur to me that he was leaving."

Eventually, Rocastle joined his teammates where, voice wobbling, he told them that he was being sold, after ten years and 277 games for the Gunners. "He was heartbroken," says close friend Smith, "but Rocky took it on the chin like he always did."

Boyhood pal Ian Wright was less impassive. "Wrighty was fuming," smiles Smith. "He'd not long arrived at the club and yelled, 'The only bloody reason I signed for Arsenal was to join up with you, Rocky!'"

FLASH GORDON 1-0 ROCKY

Freshly crowned champions Leeds made their move, sealing Rocastle's services in July 1992 for a club-record £2.5 million.

Having driven the hardest of bargains with his Leeds counterpart Bill Fotherby, Arsenal vice-chairman Dein arranged for Rocastle to be transported to his new club for a medical





– but not before he'd had a bit of fun. When the Gunners first opened their megastore in 1990, Dein commissioned Madame Tussauds to make life-size waxworks of Rocastle and captain Adams to promote the club's latest kits. Now, though, Arsenal had no need for Rocastle's doppelganger.

"I sent the waxwork up to Leeds with Rocky in the car and said to the driver, 'When you get to Leeds, make sure David remains in the car, take the waxwork up to Bill Fotherby and tell him Mr Dein has sent David Rocastle for you'," chuckles Dein.

Fotherby was straight on the phone: "Deino! What's this f**king waxwork?!"

"Well, Bill," said Dein, "what do you expect for £2.5 million?"

Overseen by gaffer Howard Wilkinson, the Whites' success was built around formidable midfield quartet Gary McAllister, Gary Speed, David Batty and Gordon Strachan, the man who Rocastle had been recruited to replace.

"David accepted that he would be trying to break into the best midfield in the country," Wilkinson tells *FFT*. "But his track record was there for all to see."

The trouble for Rocastle was that Strachan wasn't quite so close to the end as expected. The 35-year-old carried on playing regularly for another two seasons and even collected Leeds' player of the year award in 1993. With regular opportunities limited, Rocastle and Leeds chose to part company just 18 months after his move north.

"We didn't really see the best of David at Leeds," admits Wilkinson. "We never saw him consistently reproduce what he'd shown at Arsenal, where he was world class."

Leaving Elland Road for Manchester City in December '93 signalled the beginning of the end for Rocastle's playing days. The switch to Maine Road also failed to reignite his career, and he headed back to London the following August with Chelsea. There were also trials at Southampton and Aberdeen, plus loan spells with Norwich and Hull, where he scored on his debut against Scarborough.

Rocastle was still only 30 but nowhere, it seemed, could ever match what he had with Arsenal. "I don't think he was the same again once he'd left Highbury," says Groves. "It may sound over-sentimental, but I think leaving broke his heart."

English football was apparently done with Rocky, but a fresh opportunity beckoned in the summer of 1998 as he joined Malaysian side Sabah after his Stamford Bridge release. Life, for a short time at least, was sweet. The Rocastles enjoyed the warmer weather and new experiences that Malaysia offered, and the locals took him to their hearts as Sabah reached the Malaysian FA Cup final.

In September 2000, though, Rocastle rang Anderson and mentioned in passing that he had a problem. "He said, 'Dad, I've got a little lump on my neck' – when he said that, I just went cold," says Anderson.

Rocastle returned to the UK, and when the test results finally came back, his worst fears were confirmed. He had been diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

"The next few months were terrible," says Anderson. "But he never moaned once, not even when he was having chemo and lost all his hair. He still had that big smile on his face. But he was very protective, too – I don't think he wanted the people closest to him to know how ill he was."

Brother Steve concurs. "I think we assumed that, as he was always very positive, he was receiving the right treatment and would be fine," he says. "Looking back, I don't think he really wanted to accept that it was terminal. He believed he would beat it."

In early March 2001, Anderson contacted Dein about Rocastle's illness, suggesting the pair visit him at his Ascot home. When they arrived, Dein was stunned into silence.

"To see what that disease had done to him was frightening," he recalls. "You think, 'Of all the people in the world...' and wonder, 'Why Rocky?'"

While there, Dein presented Rocastle with a new Arsenal shirt, signed by the squad with his name on the back. "Rocky never played for us in the Premier League and never wore the red shirt complete with his name on," continues Dein. "He was thrilled with it."



Left A textbook Rocky stepover **Below** Highbury pays its respects **Bottom** Ryan at the FA Cup final, shortly after his father's passing

As Rocastle's health deteriorated, he was moved to Wexham Park Hospital in Slough. Anderson visited him again, meeting up with Rocastle's wife Jan. They sat together in silence, holding Rocastle's hands as he lay motionless on the bed.

"We knew that he didn't have a lot of time left," explains Anderson. "Suddenly his eyes opened, his face lit up and that smile of his broke across his face. I don't know if he had seen the bright light they always talk about, but it was an almost spiritual moment – I'll never forget that."

TIME TO SAY GOODBYE

David Rocastle died on March 31, 2001. The same day, Arsenal beat rivals Tottenham 2-0 at Highbury. Robert Pires – wearing Rocastle's No.7 shirt – opened the scoring.

Five days later, Rocastle's funeral was held at Windsor Parish Church. There was neither a spare seat, nor dry eye in the house as both the football community and Rocastle's family gathered to pay their respects. "It was tough seeing these big, strong guys that David used to go into battle with every week, standing there crying," says Steve Rocastle.

"South London must have been empty that day," says teammate Smith, who was one of the pallbearers alongside Adams, Wright, Thomas and Paul Davis.

Anderson, meanwhile, provided the eulogy. "I've no idea how I even managed to speak," he remembers.

Rocastle's son Ryan – Arsenal's mascot for the 2001 FA Cup Final against Liverpool – was only nine when his father passed away. Two decades on, recollections of his dad remain sketchy – especially his playing days. Clips on social media and YouTube have been helpful, as have the endless memories shared by his family and dad's old teammates, including his godfather Smith.

"I was so young when he died that I didn't really realise how popular he was – not just at Arsenal but at the other teams he played for," he tells *FFT*. "It only dawned on me in Arsenal's last season at Highbury when they had a day in aid of the David Rocastle Trust, the charity set up in my dad's name.

"I started seeing all these people with No.7 shirts and 'ROCASTLE' on the back. I guess he will always live on."

Of that Ryan can be sure. It's more than 20 years since his dad fought his last battle, but Arsenal fans will forever know what Rocky represented.

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• Why 'Rocky' means so much to Arsenal fans *(by Jon Spurling)*

• What did George Graham ever do for Arsene Wenger? Here's what... *(by Jon Spurling)*

• Arsenal's almost-Invincibles: when Chelsea denied the Gunners more history in 1990-91 *(by Chas Newkey-Burden)*

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FROM THE FFT ARCHIVES:
AUGUST 2020

"I WANTED TO CHANGE SOMETHING AT ARSENAL, TO PLAY MY PART IN HISTORY. IT TURNED OUT WELL..."

It almost started with a scuffle at a petrol station, but ended with a statue. Now, 25 years on from his Highbury arrival, *FFT* speaks to the Arsenal legend who transformed a club forever

Words Chris Flanagan

Image PA

Dennis Bergkamp is smiling, as he remembers Clacket Lane services on the M25.

Just the merest mention of his visit, and the Dutchman is already getting flashbacks to the summer of 1995. "It was unbelievable..." explains Bergkamp, chuckling as he chats to *FourFourTwo*.

He isn't talking about the service station's facilities, as impressive as they undoubtedly were 25 years ago. He's talking about the moment when fate intervened – the moment he knew his Arsenal career was bound for glory.

A day earlier, Bergkamp had completed a £7.5 million deal to join the Gunners, following an unhappy spell at Inter in Serie A. Driving back home to the Netherlands from North London, he unwittingly took a much longer route than planned, ending up on the southern section of the M25 motorway.

Briefly stopping to fill up his BMW at Clacket Lane, just south of Croydon, he noticed the man behind him in the queue growing ever more agitated, frustrated that this rookie to the world of British petrol stations had parked in a position that blocked others from accessing the next pump. Eventually, the angry man jumped out of his car. It was Ian Wright.

The pair had never met. Soon realising it was Bergkamp stood in front of him, a suddenly joyous Wright sprinted over to give his new strike partner a hug.

"I've spoken to Ian about it a few times since, and it's ridiculous that we could have met in that petrol station, at that service station," says Bergkamp now. "How many people are there in London – about 15 or 16 million?! But you meet up on the day after you sign the contract for Arsenal, in the summer holidays – it was absolutely crazy. If that's not a sign, I don't know what is."

The duo would go on to form one of the best double acts of the '90s. Together, they would propel Arsenal to Premier League title glory, but Bergkamp had only just begun.

The Dutchman would prove the defining player of a sublime era for the club; the star who did more than anyone to transform the Gunners from the dour outfit that struggled through the final Premier League years of George Graham, to one of the greatest attacking teams of modern history. Along the way, he scored beautiful goals for both club and country. Few footballers could paint pictures on a football pitch quite like Dennis Bergkamp.

DENNIS THE LION TAMER

For Bergkamp, British football has always meant something special. Born in May 1969, he was named after the top scorer of that season's European Cup: Manchester United forward Denis Law. As a teenager, he idolised the poise and technique of Glenn Hoddle.

He had to wait until the age of 23 for his first senior appearance in England. That night, the Netherlands travelled to Wembley for a 1994 World Cup qualifier. The Oranje were third in the group, having played a game more than both Norway and Graham Taylor's England. Within half an hour, they were 2-0 down and in big trouble.

Then Bergkamp changed the course of history. Jan Wouters dinked a pass to the edge of the penalty area, and his colleague needed just one touch on the volley – the subtlest of lobs to lift the ball over Chris Woods and into the net. The Dutch fought back to draw 2-2 thanks to a late Peter van Vossen spot-kick, and England's campaign unravelled.

Six months on, Bergkamp would put an end to the Three Lions' World Cup hopes, netting the Netherlands' second goal in a 2-0 Rotterdam win. The Dutch would accompany Norway to USA 94.

"I always had a connection with England, so you could understand that those games were very special to me," the Bergkamp says now. "When I was a kid, I admired English football. Once a week, I'd watch highlights from the English league on television. Those qualifiers were special moments. I was more motivated, more intense."

Just as Marco van Basten was succumbing to injury, Bergkamp was emerging as the Netherlands' new main man. As a youngster, he had learned from the greatest of them all: Johan Cruyff.

"I first met Johan when I was in Ajax's youth team," says Bergkamp, thinking back to that moment aged 12, after Cruyff had returned for a second spell as a player. "He was with the first team, but sometimes he'd come over to the academy and coach part of a training session. I remember he did that for our age group – he turned up and did a few exercises, we'd all follow him and copy, then he went again. He left an amazing impression on everyone.

"He was the first-team manager when I was 17, and took me from the youth team to make my professional debut in December 1986. He was like a connection throughout my career, and in Holland we call it a red thread. We'd always meet up – it could be a month apart or four years apart, but we'd always have contact."

In his first season, Bergkamp was a substitute in the European Cup Winners' Cup final as Ajax beat Lokomotive Leipzig. Cruyff left midway through the next campaign but Bergkamp came off the bench again in the Cup Winners' Cup final, where this time Ajax lost to Mechelen.

A finisher as much as a provider in those early days, he topped the Eredivisie scoring chart in three straight seasons at the start of the '90s – netting a career-high 33 goals in all competitions in 1992-93, a year after winning the UEFA Cup. Bergkamp also scored three times in four matches at Euro 92, sharing the Golden Boot with Karl-Heinz Riedle, Tomas Brolin and Danish midfielder Henrik Larsen.

In the summer of 1993, a couple of months after that goal against England at Wembley, it was time for Bergkamp to take the next step in his career. As he made a decision over his future, he spoke to Cruyff – then in charge of Barcelona.

"Funnily enough, he never asked me to join him," reveals Bergkamp. "But he had a certain way of speaking like, 'All right, why would you go ▶



Right "I always had a connection with England, so games against them were very special to me" **Below** Winning the Cup Winners' Cup in his first senior year





Images PA, Getty Images (main)

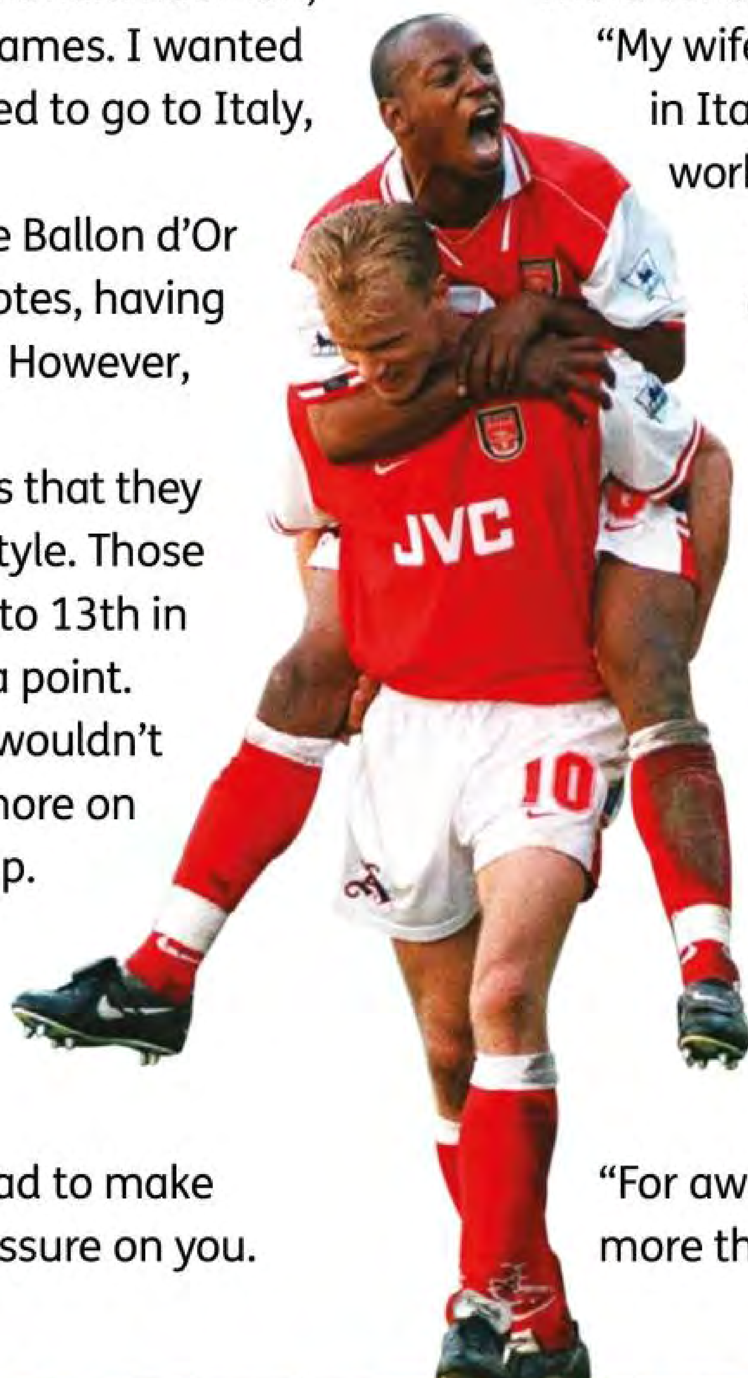
to that team or that team? That club isn't good enough, and the other will give you these problems'. He never actually asked me to join Barça, but of course I knew that he wanted me to go there!

"In those years, though, you were only allowed four foreigners and only three could play at one time. I remember Ronald Koeman, Romario and Hristo Stoichkov were there. Big names. I wanted to make a name for myself, and I always wanted to go to Italy, so I decided to join Inter."

In 1993, Bergkamp would finish second in the Ballon d'Or and third in the FIFA World Player of the Year votes, having been third in the Ballon d'Or 12 months earlier. However, his move to Inter didn't go as planned.

Bergkamp joined the Nerazzurri after promises that they were planning to implement a new attacking style. Those plans were soon shelved and they plummeted to 13th in Serie A, avoiding an unthinkable relegation by a point.

"At Ajax there were a lot of young players – I wouldn't say it was like a playground, but it was based more on technique and having fun," continues Bergkamp. "As a striker, you'd have five or six chances to score in a game. But then you have to make the next step, and Italy was the total opposite of what I was used to. As a striker, you'd only have one chance a game and you had to make sure you scored, because there was a lot of pressure on you.



"If I hadn't moved to Inter, I wouldn't have become the player I was in England, because it was a learning experience. Sometimes in Italy, though, I saw football as going to work. You'd turn up at 9am and go home at 5pm. It was more intense – much more was expected. It was more serious, much bigger than the Dutch league.

"My wife and I had recently got married, so privately our two years in Italy were like an extended honeymoon, but in football it was work sometimes, battling hard to get some acknowledgement."

Bergkamp netted just eight times in his first Serie A season, although he scored eight more to become joint-top scorer in the UEFA Cup where the matches were more open. Inter went all the way – seeing off Norwich en route to the final against Austria Salzburg – and Bergkamp collected a third European trophy at the age of 25.

But that wasn't enough to convince everyone at San Siro, and his second campaign delivered a paltry four goals. His relationship with coach Ottavio Bianchi deteriorated, and even the journeys to and from away games added to the Dutchman's stress. Inter often travelled in small propellor planes, and Bergkamp became ever more scared of flying after a series of uncomfortable trips.

"It was a psychological thing that grew on me, to the point where it was interfering with my football," he says. "For away matches, I was focusing on the journey after the game more than the game itself."

Left Wright and Dennis were an ace double act **Below** Despite UEFA Cup glory, his Inter career didn't take off

In the summer of 1995, Bergkamp made two significant decisions. After meeting up with the national team ahead of a Euro 96 qualifier in Belarus, then realising he couldn't face the flight to Minsk, he pulled out of the trip and decided his flying days were over. "I didn't want to do it any more," he tells *FFT*. "It was a difficult decision, but it made me a better player and better person. I could leave it behind. Yes, I missed one or two games that I didn't want to, but mentally I was free to be a better player. It helped me."

He also decided to leave Inter. "At the end of the second season, my agent asked the club what their intentions were for the next year," he explains. "A lot of promises had been made but they hadn't followed up on them, so again we asked some questions about the squad and manager. They couldn't give us any straight answers, so both parties agreed, 'Let's move on'. That was very late, May or June, and then we had to focus on finding a new club really quickly. I said straight away that I wanted to go to England."

He wasn't short of options. "I think my agent mentioned there were three or four clubs in England," reveals Bergkamp. "I'm not sure if one was Manchester United, or if in London there were one or two – maybe even Tottenham, I don't know."

It was Arsenal, though, who grabbed his attention. He had already been intrigued by an article he read about the club in Dutch magazine *Voetbal International*. "Arsenal had won the Cup Winners' Cup around that time and there were a lot of stories about them, which I'd been digging into," he recalls. His agent had connections with the club, too, after fellow countryman Glenn Helder moved to Highbury from Vitesse Arnhem months earlier. "Arsenal contacted my agent, and I spoke to David Dein and Bruce Rioch on the phone. They told me their plans and I had a good feeling about it. That was within one week of deciding to leave Inter, so there was no room for other teams any more. That's the way I work – when I make a decision, I stick to it."



NOT BAD FOR A CARLOS KICKABALL

Arsenal may have lifted the Cup Winners' Cup after victory over Parma in 1994, but Bergkamp was arriving at a difficult moment for the club. League form had tailed off badly after their last title triumph in 1991: they came 10th in 1992-93, when they were the lowest scorers in the entire division, then 12th in 1994-95. George Graham had been sacked in February 1995, after receiving a payment from an agent. The team had reached a second successive Cup Winners' Cup final, before being embarrassed by Nayim from the halfway line against Real Zaragoza. Rioch arrived that summer, with plans to transform the Gunners' style.

"It was some sort of a gamble, but it turned out well," the Dutchman says of his decision to join. "I didn't really know about 'boring Arsenal' when I signed – I only heard that throughout my first couple of years at the club, when people told me about it.



"They had the intention to build something around me, and to play attacking, attractive football. They lived up to their promises. I wanted to change something in the team. That was the reason I went to Inter, and that was the reason I went to Arsenal, too – to play my own part in that philosophy."

But his first seven games for the club didn't produce a goal. Unable to find the net in a League Cup tie at fourth-tier strugglers Hartlepool, one national newspaper called him a 'Hartle-Fool' on their back page. Spurs chairman Alan Sugar made pointed remarks about big-money overseas signings, dubbing them "Carlos Kickaballs", and Stuart Pearce suggested that Arsenal should have bought Stan Collymore instead.

Thankfully, most of the criticism passed Bergkamp by. "Me and my wife were in a hotel, Sopwell House, and she was pregnant which was another step in our lives," he says. "We were in the hotel, sometimes desperate to make our own food, because after several weeks you're fed up with the hotel menu!

"We never noticed that the papers were writing that stuff. My main focus was to do well for the club and my new teammates. They were expecting me to score and make a difference. I thought those first few games went OK, but that wasn't good enough. It was only after six or seven that I heard there was some talk about me. I think other players and managers had a go at me – even chairmen from other clubs, who said I was just coming to collect my money and then disappear again. I only realised that after one or two months, so maybe it was for the best or it would have been more difficult. I knew I had to improve, even though it wasn't that bad at the start. But once I scored, it was a relief for many people – including myself."

"IF I HADN'T MOVED TO INTER, I WOULDN'T HAVE BECOME THE PLAYER I WAS IN ENGLAND. IT WAS A LEARNING EXPERIENCE"

Bergkamp broke his duck at home to Southampton on September 23 with two goals in a 4-2 win: the first an expertly-controlled volley, the second a sensational strike from outside the box. He scored 16 times that campaign, guiding Arsenal back into Europe thanks to a stunning late winner in the final match of the season.

But days before 1996-97 got underway, Rioch was sacked following a breakdown of his relationship with the board. "When Bruce was fired, that was a strange time for me," admits Bergkamp. "A year earlier, I'd joined Arsenal based on the plans they had. Now I was thinking, 'OK, what's this? Is it going another way? Is it some sort of Italian approach again, promising things but not doing them?'

"But soon enough, I heard that Arsene Wenger was going to become the manager. When I played at Ajax, there were only two teams in the world who played a 4-3-3 formation – one was Ajax and the other was Monaco, where Arsene was the manager. So I thought, 'This actually might turn out all right – he's got an attacking philosophy which could suit my game'. Then he came in and started talking to all the players. I understood what his approach to the game was, and we were on the same level from day one."

Wenger also got the best out of Wright at Highbury. "Our partnership worked," says Bergkamp. "We could learn from each other, on and off the pitch, and it seemed to help us both reach a higher level. I learned a lot from the English guys like Ian, and they were eager to learn from my philosophy of the game – they used to mention that many times. It all came together."

"MY FAVOURITE? THE ARGENTINA GOAL"

In 1997-98, Bergkamp and Wright fired Arsenal to the Premier League title. Bergkamp scored 22 goals, his best tally in English football. That August, he became the only player ever to have finished first, second and third in the same BBC Goal of the Month competition. One came ▶

Images PA/EMPICS (Wright), Getty Images

at Southampton, the other two on a remarkable evening at Leicester, when he bagged all three in a 3-3 draw. Foxes manager Martin O'Neill described it as "the best hat-trick I've ever seen".

After a curling effort from outside the box, then a dinked finish which looped off goalkeeper Kasey Keller and just underneath the crossbar, his treble was completed in the 92nd minute. Brilliantly pulling David Platt's ball from the sky with the outside of his right boot, Bergkamp instantly flicked it past Matt Elliott with his second touch, then coolly side-footed into the far corner with his third. All of it was delivered in one breathtaking moment.

"I knew I could do those sorts of things," he says. "Everyone I played with knows what kind of level was reached in training sessions, and it all came together against Leicester. The first goal was special because that was a trademark of mine, curling the ball into the far corner. The second had a little bit of luck, but the third goal was so satisfying, as it's something you've got in your mind. You want to do that move, go to the goal and score.

"It was very similar to my last-minute goal against Argentina at the World Cup. The ball is coming from a long way behind you, and in that one or two seconds you decide what you're going to do. If it all comes together, that's so satisfying."

Indeed, it was striking just how alike that winner against Argentina was, in the France 98 quarter-finals, ten months later.

"SO MANY PEOPLE HAD ASKED ME, 'DID YOU REALLY MEAN IT?' THAT I THOUGHT, 'OK, I'VE GOT TO SEE WHAT THEY ALL SAW'"

"You practise five or six times a week for those moments," he adds. "You know you can control the ball, have a good first touch, another touch and finish, but it's a matter of doing it at the highest level. All of those little fragments have to come together."

Given the magnitude of the match, that stunner to down Argentina is his favourite goal. "I'd say so, as it was on the world stage," he says. It also took him past Faas Wilkes as his country's all-time top scorer. "It was amazing – a quarter-final against a team like Argentina, then making history. You still see the goal a lot. I can only be proud of that."

In that season ahead of the World Cup, Bergkamp had been voted Premier League player of the year by both the PFA and Football Writers' Association – finishing third again in the FIFA World Player of the Year poll, this time jointly with Zinedine Zidane. Like Zidane, he played the game with an incredible beauty, honed from an early age.

"I spent hours playing on the streets and always admired a certain way of playing," he says. "The way I moved, the way I controlled balls and my technique probably made it look beautiful. You've got to have elegant players, and some who play a different way with more tackles, working hard. That's nice to see, too. Beauty was more my style, but it wasn't that I didn't want to make ugly goals or bad tackles."

Bergkamp could certainly stick up for himself when required: he was sent off four times during his time at Arsenal. "I learned especially in England to defend myself, because it's a very physical game," he says. "You can moan and complain about it, but you can also do something about it yourself. Sometimes it looked a bit silly and wasn't the right way to do it, but you have the mentality that you want to win, and that could all go down to one battle with a player who wants to take the ball away from you. The mentality kicks in and says, 'OK, I don't want that', and sometimes you do mad things. But I could handle myself."

"OF COURSE HE F**KING MEANT IT"

After Ian Wright, came Thierry Henry. Bergkamp had suffered the pain of missing an FA Cup semi-final replay penalty in 1999, before Ryan Giggs' solo goal put Manchester United firmly on course for the Treble. Months later, Henry arrived and another formidable strike partnership was formed. While Bergkamp was once the main goalscorer at Ajax, he was largely content to supply at Arsenal.

"I enjoyed trying to provide for the other striker, to make you strong as a couple," he says. "It suited my game and it suited theirs – most of the time they were the finisher and I was the one preparing the goal. I could adjust myself to many different players. Thierry was probably the most complete player I ever played with – you can't really say that he had some flaws, or something he wasn't very good at. He also had a super mentality. He was a winner."

Bergkamp brought an end to his international career after Euro 2000, to focus on club football. In any case, travelling to the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea would have been impossible without flying.



Above "Now you see me, Nikos..."



He rarely featured in European away games for the Gunners, having agreed when he signed that he wouldn't be required to fly. Sometimes they missed him – Arsenal's Champions League form was often not as impressive as their league form, but when possible he would travel to matches in Western Europe by car.

"I'd go with my wife and her father," reveals Bergkamp. "He did the driving, so it really wasn't an issue. I was used to road trips from when I was 18, and I enjoyed it. It meant that I could go to the games and play – I had to cover a few more miles than the rest of the squad, but they were good memories."

For the 2000 UEFA Cup Final against Galatasaray, he ventured as far as Copenhagen: a 16-hour drive from North London. Sadly his journey didn't end in victory, as the Turks won 4-1 on penalties. But Bergkamp would lift the FA Cup four times, and a second Premier League triumph came after another moment of genius.

Earlier in that 2001-02 campaign, Bergkamp had memorably helped Arsenal beat Juventus in the Champions League, twisting and turning to provide a sublime assist for Freddie Ljungberg at Highbury. But the Gunners sat third in the Premier League in early March, ahead of a key fixture at second-placed Newcastle. Eleven minutes in, Robert Pires fed Bergkamp on the edge of the box, and the Dutchman scored what was later voted as the Premier League's greatest goal.

Collecting the ball with his back to goal, Bergkamp brilliantly flicked it around one side of Nikos Dabizas, pirouetted past the Greek ▶

Images Getty Images

"SIGNING BERGKAMP WAS A GAME-CHANGER"

***FFT* quizzes two key former foes and a superfan for their take on the Gunners great**



JAMIE CARRAGHER ON FACING DENNIS

"It wasn't until you got onto a pitch with Dennis Bergkamp that you realised how big and powerful he actually was. You watched him on TV, saw what a silky player he was and thought, 'Well OK, you can maybe bully him'. But he was so strong.

"He had a nasty streak in him, as I found out once – he caught me with a couple of hefty tackles and got sent off at Highbury. But I still think he's one of the legends of the Premier League.

"Sometimes, guys who play just behind the striker don't score goals, but if you look at Dennis' record throughout his career, he scored a lot of goals as well – certainly at the start of his career with Ajax. He scored famous goals, too: you immediately think of that one against Argentina.

"For me, Thierry Henry is the best player in Premier League history, but Bergkamp took Arsenal from a team fighting for the top five or six places, to a team that won the title in 1998. He was player of the year that season, and it elevated the Gunners to being the team regularly going for titles with Manchester United. Signing him was a game-changer for Arsenal."



NIKOS DABIZAS ON *THAT* GOAL

"The game before Newcastle played Arsenal, we won 1-0 against Sunderland at the Stadium of Light – I remember it because I scored! Arsenal was a big match for us, and trying to mark Dennis was always a big challenge. When you came up against a physical player, you prepared yourself for a battle. Against him, it was also a psychological one. You had to be on your toes all the time. He was smart.

"To score the goal he scored that day, everything had to be perfect. It was like a perfectly-written script, an act of genius. I had to watch it back on *Match of the Day* to check what he had actually done.

"Before he received the ball, I was well positioned. I wasn't tight to him, but I wasn't too far away either. But the control, the direction of the ball, the spin, the reaction... the whole thing was unbelievable. When I realised he was turning around me, I tried to bring him down, but he didn't go to ground. Thank God he didn't, as the goal would not have been witnessed.

"People still remind me of it, not only in Greece but all over the world. Some have said that I was the negative piece of that action, but for me it was the total opposite. I was so proud to be present, to be part of a piece of football history. You can just hold your hands up. It wasn't a matter of me being humiliated by Bergkamp – it was a work of art."



TIM STILLMAN: THE SUPPORTER'S VIEW

"We've got Dennis Bergkamp! We've got Dennis Bergkamp!

"For 11 years, that simple chant tumbled from the stands at Highbury, and up and down the country. It wasn't even sung to a recognisable tune. It was a chant in the literal sense and an affirmation – initially, one of sheer disbelief – 'OMG! WE'VE GOT DENNIS BERGKAMP!'

"As the seasons rolled on and Dennis' showreel continued to expand, the song soundtracked his moments of genius. To many Arsenal fans, the Dutchman is the finest player to don the red shirt – but that only partially explains his popularity. His longevity adds to the legend: he spent 11 seasons with the Gunners, when he would have walked into any team in the world for at least eight of those. He didn't court suitors, even though he would have found plenty if he had.

"Bergkamp came to the club from Inter when Arsenal fans weren't accustomed to footballers from outside the UK, Ireland and Scandinavia. He arrived when Arsenal had finished 12th in the Premier League and lost a European final to a last-minute, 45-yard lob from an ex-Tottenham player. Our self-esteem was at a low.

"Signing him immediately addressed our wounded self-image. We had glimpsed his huge talent before that, but couldn't appreciate his steeliness. Sometimes he enjoyed the physical side of the English game a little too much, but it was fine with us. It helped dispel some of those preconceptions that foreign imports were subjected to.

"He retired at the right time as well. Nobody would have been disappointed to see him continue. His legacy was not complicated by decline, but most of us knew it was the right time, especially as his retirement coincided with Arsenal's move to the Emirates.

"His arrival was joyful, and his departure as perfectly judged as his touch. We had Dennis Bergkamp. We still talk about him all the time."



defender on the other, then coolly stroked it past Shay Given's despairing dive. So seemingly impossible was the move to pull off, a debate has raged ever since about whether he actually meant to score in the way he did. "I saw Dennis do stuff like that in training – of course he f**king meant it," was Ian Wright's blunt assessment.

"The week after that goal, 'Did you really mean it?' was the question everyone was asking me," chuckles Bergkamp. "I couldn't understand what people meant by the question. I didn't see the goal on television for several days, and so many people were asking me that I thought, 'OK, I have to see what they saw'. I watched it back, and then I could understand what they meant. The pass from Pires was slightly behind me and I was adjusting myself to the situation, because I wanted to go through on goal with one touch. I touched the ball, but my body was already turning the other way, so it looked quite good! For many goals, players just decide at the last moment what they're going to do. That was the same with me. I'm glad it looked like that, and that everyone is still talking about it today."

Arsenal won 2-0 at St James' Park that night, ending the season with a further ten consecutive victories to overhaul Manchester United and claim the title. Two seasons later, Bergkamp was involved in one of the most remarkable teams in Premier League history.

There had been speculation about the Dutchman's future ahead of the Invincibles campaign: out of contract, the 34-year-old only agreed a new deal just three weeks before the start of the 2003-04 season. He insists, though, that he had no intention of leaving.

"In my mind, never," he says. "I decided very soon into my Arsenal career that I'd like to finish in football there. I always had in my mind that 33 or 34 would be the end of my career – it was actually 37, which shows what a great time I had.

"In that final period of my career, my contract was extended by one year maybe two or three times. Before the Invincibles season, that was maybe the biggest battle with the board to get my contract extended, because at a certain age you have to take a pay cut and won't play as often. But I always took care of my body and knew I had a few years left in me; that I could be important for the team. I must admit, when you have such a good time it's hard to battle with people you respect, but you do it for yourself and your future. In the end, though, we both made the right decision."

Bergkamp treasures every moment of the unbeaten Premier League campaign that followed.

"The word says it all – invincible," he smiles. "You felt like that going onto the pitch. You knew you were going to win – it was just a matter of how, and by how many goals. You'd look around the dressing room and think, 'Jeez, what a team'. We were better than our opponents in every single area.

"We were all friends, too. We'd go to dinner with six or seven players, or meet up at someone's house with the wives and girlfriends. Maybe you need to be a team of friends to be successful. It was a great time and it went down in history. It's hard to beat – there have been some fantastic teams since then, quite recently with Manchester City and Liverpool, and they find it really difficult to do what we did. Every year, it makes me more proud. It was a tremendous achievement."

THE LAST TANGO IN PARIS

The 2005-06 campaign would be Bergkamp's final season. Fittingly, his last goal arrived in an April fixture designated 'Dennis Bergkamp Day'. Supporters wore special T-shirts and a number of Ajax fans were in attendance, as the veteran came on as a substitute and found the net against West Bromwich Albion.

"A few months ago, I saw it again with my family because we read that 'so many years ago today, it was Dennis Bergkamp Day'," he says. "We discussed it and I only realised then, 'Oh, it's quite amazing that I scored my last goal that day!' It's special to put that down in history."

His last appearance came in the Gunners' final match at Highbury, against Wigan – but he would have loved to sign off in the Champions League final against Barcelona, even if he had only played a small role in that European campaign.

"I didn't play a lot that season because my Achilles were worn down, so physically it was difficult," he admits. "I spoke to Arsene before the Champions League final and he said, 'I'm not playing you in the game, but obviously I want you to come with us – you're in the squad'. I knew I wasn't going to play, so it was respectful of him to tell me. It was like,



Above Dennis' testimonial in 2006 was the first match at the Emirates

"WE WERE ALL FRIENDS – MAYBE YOU NEED TO BE A TEAM OF MATES TO BE SUCCESSFUL"

'I know in those years that we've grown as a club, you've played a big part in it, and now here we are on the biggest stage in club football'. Arsene more or less said, 'Maybe we owe you to play in this game, but I just can't do it'. I truly respected that and I understood, because of course others would start in Paris.

"I was only hoping to come on and maybe make a difference in my last game, but that went down the drain after 20 minutes when Jens Lehmann got sent off, and then it was a very different game. I'm sure Arsene had it in his mind to put me on at the end if everything was OK, but after the red card it didn't work. I was so happy for the club to get to that stage, though. I knew I'd helped to develop the team."

Bergkamp's immense contribution would be recognised again, when Arsenal opened the Emirates Stadium by playing Ajax in a testimonial for the Dutchman. A few years further down the line, a letter arrived. Another significant honour was about to come his way.

"I knew I'd done something for the club, that the respect had been there from day one, but when I got a letter asking if it was OK – if I'd agree! – to have a statue outside the Emirates, I couldn't believe what was happening," he says, laughing at the politeness of the request to immortalise him. He was never likely to object.

"It was an amazing gesture, something for the big names at a club. I was part of Highbury for 11 years, but to still be part of the Emirates as well is fantastic, and shows how much Arsenal think I contributed in their history. It's one of my biggest achievements."

Bergkamp returned to his old club Ajax in 2008, remaining on their coaching staff for nine years before departing in December 2017 when the Eredivisie side decided to make changes.

He admits he would consider returning to England. "When the time is right, I'd love to go back and get a role somewhere," he reveals. "At the moment we're great in Holland. I've got a young family and have been out of coaching for a little while now. But I must admit, I have the urge to go on the pitch again and help, whether it's with the technical or coaching staff. It might be a bit too early, but you never know. We'll see what comes my way."

Have Arsenal ever mentioned a return? "At the moment there hasn't been any contact about that, but as soon as I make my decision, let's see what happens," he says. "Of course it would be ideal at Arsenal, as I spent 11 years there and have a good feeling with the club."

Given that Thierry Henry and Patrick Vieira both managers now, with Montreal Impact and Nice respectively, does he dream of going back to the club with one of his old teammates some day? "I follow how they're doing from afar," says Bergkamp. "It's a shame that MLS stopped after Thierry took a job there, and Patrick is doing well at Nice.

"I'm really interested in Mikel Arteta and how he's doing at Arsenal, as there have been signs that he wants to change their philosophy. It looked good in the few matches I watched earlier in the year. But my future, who knows? In football, one day is not the same as the other."

Whether he ever returns to North London or not, his Arsenal legacy is secure. Just as he intended when he first arrived at Highbury in 1995, Bergkamp guided the Gunners into an era of success and transformed their style of play into one admired around the world.

"To be honest, that's probably the one thing I'm unbelievably proud of, because it says you were important for a long period," he reflects, 25 years on. "You don't change a team or philosophy in a year or two. I was there for 11, and even now, people see Arsenal as a ball-playing and attacking team – definitely nowhere near a boring team. I believe I helped to change that.

"When I finished my career, the biggest compliment I received was from Bob Wilson. He said, 'Just remember one thing, Dennis – you were the one who changed this team, this club and this philosophy'. He was someone who had played a big part at Arsenal previously, and coming from him it was quite special. Even after all the moments, the trophies and the goals, that was one of the biggest compliments anyone could have given me. It made me realise 'OK, I've done something right'."

MORE ON FOURFOURTWO.COM

- The making of Dennis Bergkamp at Ajax, 1986-87 *(by Dolf van Aert)*
- Dennis Bergkamp, You Ask The Questions: "I never expected to be at Arsenal for 11 years" *(by David Winner)*
- Dennis Bergkamp remembered by his former ghost writer, 20 years after his Arsenal arrival *(by Chas Newkey-Burden)*
- 11 of the most insane injury times ever, featuring Bergkamp genius, fightbacks and own goals *(by Joe Brewin)*

50 GREATEST GUNNERS

OF ALL TIME







From Chapman's gentlemen through to multiple Double heroes and Wenger's Invincibles, these are the greatest to ever wear red and white

Words Mark White

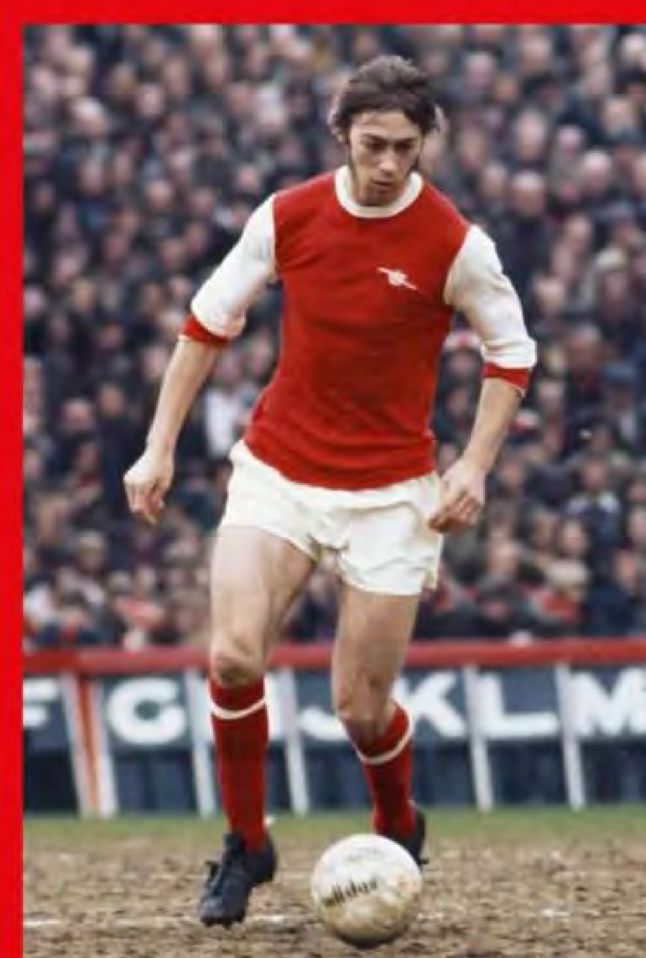


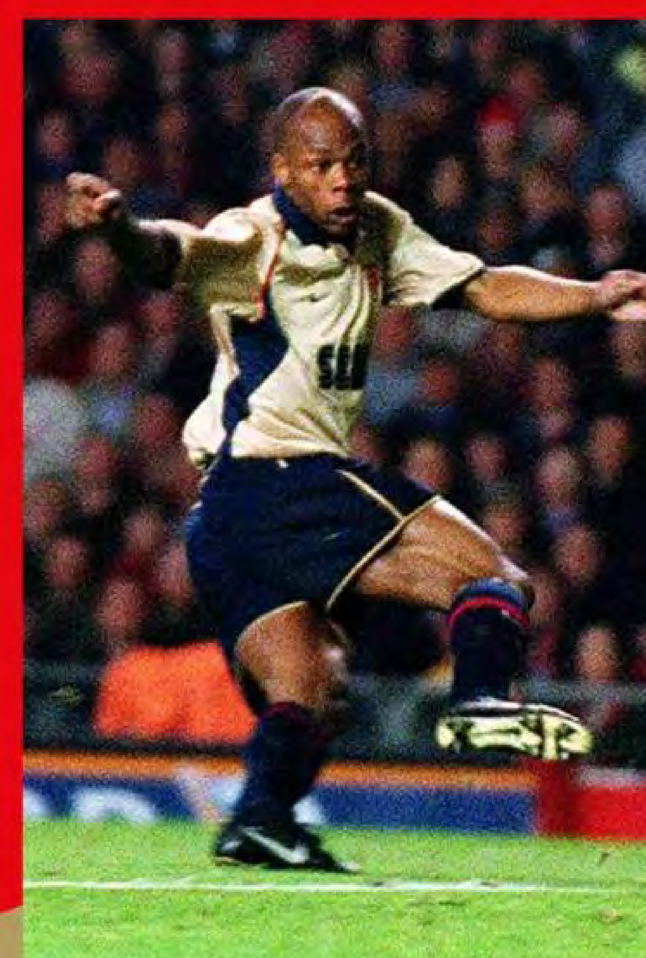
On the exterior of the Emirates Stadium, giant murals of Arsenal legends interlink with one another, arm in arm. They stand tall and can be seen for miles around in North London.

Arsenal make no secret of their legends – and this is a club with plenty of them. The club are fervently proud of their history that began south of the river in the 1880s with Victorian gentlemen. It was at Highbury, however, that modern football was born with the godfather to whom today's game owes so much, Herbert Chapman – and from there, there have been many who have lit up not just North London but the world.

Arsenal have won trophies most decades, after all – and even when they didn't, there were still stars who stood the test of time. Whether they came from the fabled academy setup or were brought in from elsewhere, there's a history of turning nobodies into stars, stars into superstars. And Arsenal have had a reputation for very different kinds of football: boring, boring Arsenal, with rock-solid defensive stalwarts melted away in the '90s, for a more stylish, continental brand of football.

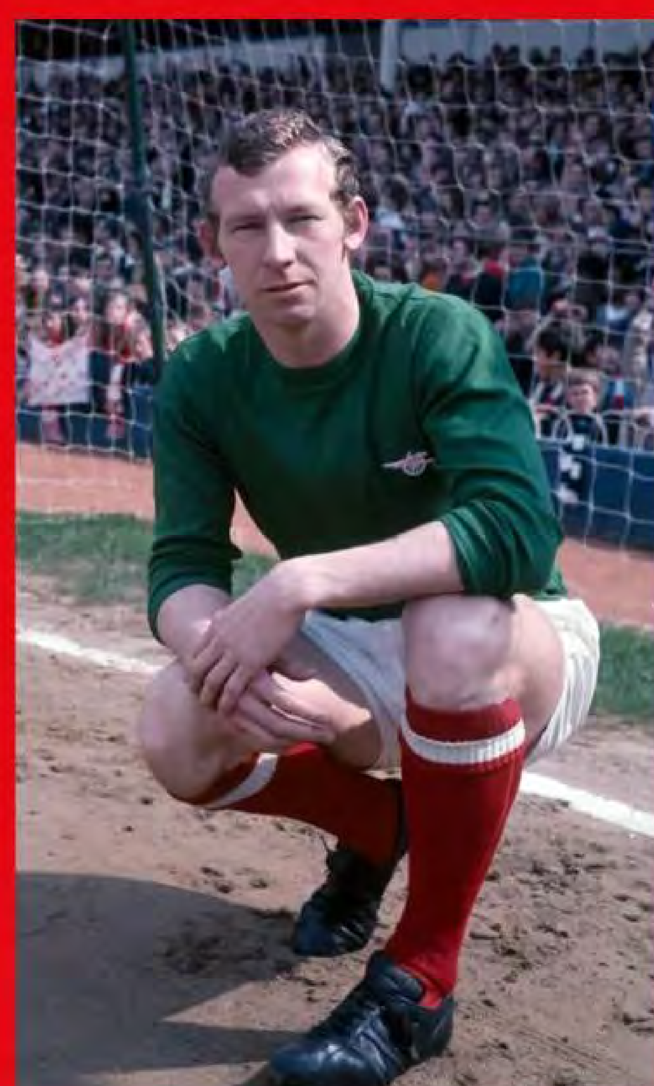
Perhaps one day, the likes of Emile Smith Rowe and Bukayo Saka will be on this list. But for now, these are the finest players ever to wear the cannon...











Images Bob Thomas Sports Photography via Getty Images (Wright, Rice), Stuart MacFarlane/Arsenal FC via Getty Images (Vieira, Bergkamp, Wiltord), Clive Brunskill /Allsport/Getty Images (Ljungberg), Don Morley/Allsport/Getty Images (George), Mark Leech/Offside/Getty Images (Nicholas), Ray Wright/Mark Leech Sports Photography/Getty Images (Wilson)



50 MICHAEL THOMAS

1984-1991

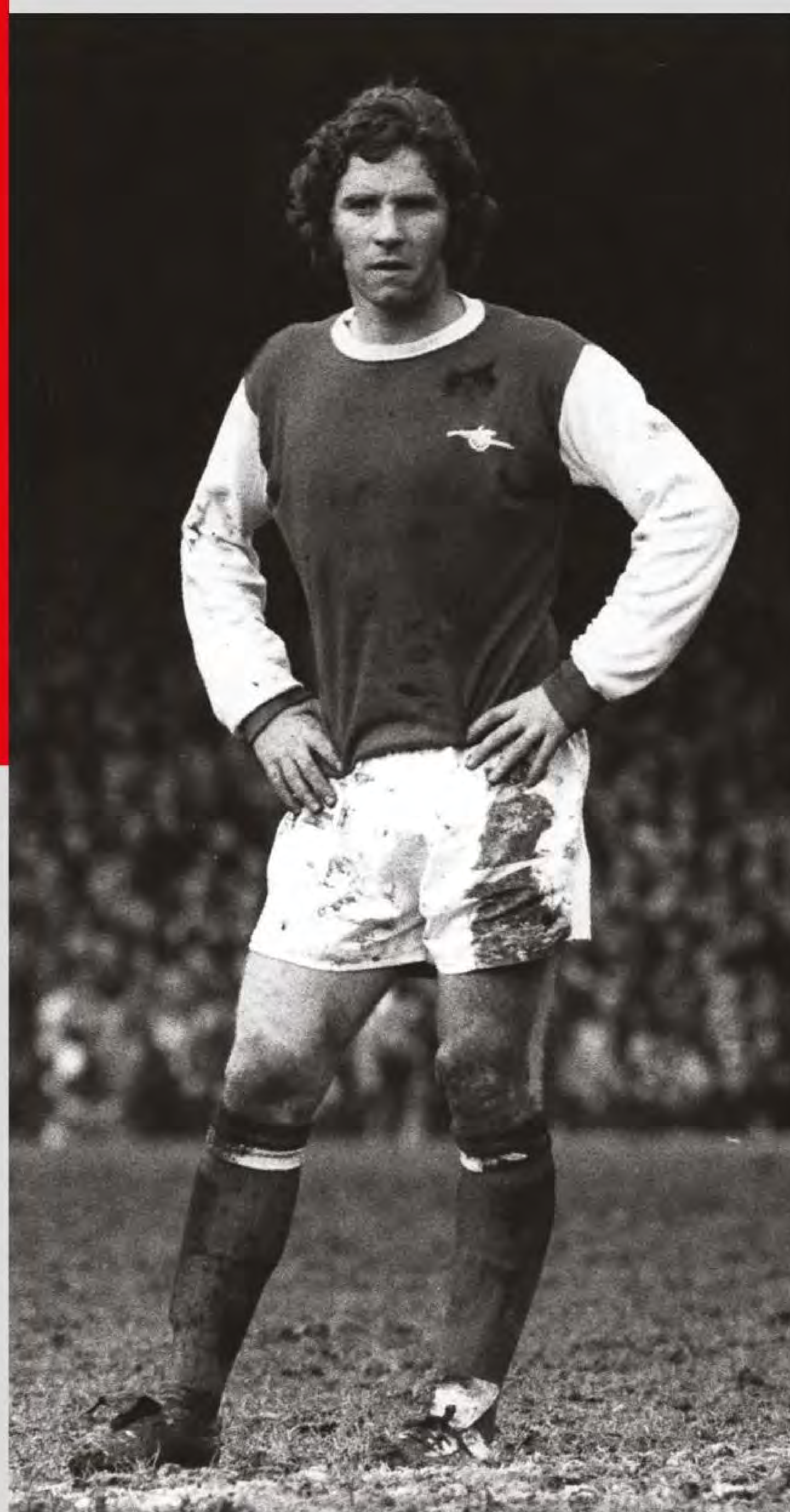


Always the calmest man on the field, it was fortunate that the most dramatic moment in league history fell at the feet of Michael Thomas. Thomas secured the 1988-89 title for Arsenal at Anfield in the dying embers of the season and with it, etched his name into the Marble Halls of Arsenal history.

49 DAVID JACK
1928-1934



When Herbert Chapman signed David Jack from Bolton, he asked the barman to double the gin in his opposing representatives' drinks to skew the negotiation. Jack was well worth the bar tab too, firing Arsenal to three titles. He's still one of three players to score over 100 English top-flight league goals for two different clubs.





48 JENS LEHMANN
2003-2008, 2011

Jens Lehmann is remembered best for screaming at his defenders and at referees, as well as his curious time-wasting antics – but the German is simply one of Arsenal's greatest-ever goalkeepers. Not only was he the custodian of the Invincibles era, he holds the record of the longest run of not conceding in Champions League history – 853 minutes.



47 NICOLAS ANELKA
1997-1999

Defenders just couldn't cope with the speed of Nicolas Anelka. The quicksilver Frenchman was fast, fearless and ferocious in the final third, helping fire Arsenal to the 1997-98 Double and also scoring in the FA Cup Final. He left almost as quickly as he burst onto the scene – but what an impact he made.

46 ALAN BALL
1971-1976



The youngest Lion in England's World Cup-winning pride, Alan Ball arrived at Arsenal five years later and became an ever-present for the Gunners. In a deteriorating team, Ball was a true spark of quality, holding the rest of the team together and scoring over 50 goals from midfield in five years.

45 PETER STOREY

1962-1977



A bastion of reliability, Peter Storey broke into an Arsenal team that struggled in the '60s but became a cornerstone of Bertie Mee's 1970-71 Double-winning team. In 15 years at the club, Storey became a byword for consistency and enjoyed some of Highbury's greatest highs. Wherever he slotted in, you could trust him to deliver.

"IN 15 YEARS, STOREY BECAME A BYWORD FOR CONSISTENCY AND ENJOYED SOME OF HIGHBURY'S GREATEST HIGHS"



44 BRIAN TALBOT

1979-1985



Midfielder Brian Talbot was as strong as an ox. He played over 300 times for the Gunners in six years, managed to score in an FA Cup Final and very rarely missed a game, becoming a pillar at Highbury in a time of scant success. In the 1979-80 season he played every one of Arsenal's 70 matches.



43 AARON RAMSEY

2008-2019

Scorer of two FA Cup Final winners, Aaron Ramsey is a lesson in bouncing back. Having suffered a horror injury against Stoke aged just 19, he developed into one of the finest all-round midfielders in the Premier League and ended the Gunners' trophy drought in 2014. He scored some wonder goals along the way, too.

Images Allsport/Getty Images (Thomas), Popperfoto via Getty Images (Jack, Talbot), Shaun Botterill/Getty Images (Lehmann), Mike Hewitt/Allsport/Getty Images (Anelka), Hulton Archive/Getty Images (Ball), Daily Express/Hulton Archive/Getty Images (Storey), Laurence Griffiths/Getty Images (Ramsey)



42 GEORGE GRAHAM
1966-1972

As a manager, George Graham was ruthless and stringent at the back; as a player, he was a stylish midfielder whose laid-back style earned him the nickname 'Stroller'. He joined Arsenal during the lean years and became a key part of Bertie Mee's Double team. He later became the first man to win a title as a player and manager at Arsenal.

41 MARTIN KEOWN
1984-1986, 1993-2004



Best remembered for leaping all over Ruud van Nistelrooy when he missed a crucial penalty at Old Trafford, Martin Keown was the fifth member of Arsenal's legendary back four. The centre-back was tireless, aggressive and even filled in as a defensive midfielder at times for Arsene Wenger. As decisive and devoted a defender as you'll ever find.

"MARTIN KEOWN WAS THE FIFTH MEMBER OF ARSENAL'S LEGENDARY BACK FOUR"



40 MALCOLM MACDONALD
1976-1979

'Super Mac' was a goalscoring machine. Having topped the charts for Newcastle five years in a row, he joined Arsenal for the unusual fee of £333,333.34 and continued his trajectory. Macdonald was Arsenal's top scorer two seasons in a row, winning the Golden Boot in 1977. After relegation battles before he arrived, his goals proved key as the Gunners climbed back up the league.

Images Express/Getty Images (Graham), Stuart MacFarlane/Arsenal FC via Getty Images (Keown), Bill Smith/Popperfoto via Getty Images (MacDonald)



39 LAUREN
2000-2007

Brought to Arsenal as a midfielder, Lauren became the right-back of the Invincibles, using his supreme physicality and incredible engine to bomb up and down the wing for seven years. The Cameroonian was superb on the counterattack and incredibly loyal to Wenger, the man who brought him to England – he could certainly hit a penalty, too.



"A SUPERB LEFT-BACK, SEVERELY UNDERVALUED BY ENGLAND"

38 NIGEL WINTERBURN
1987-2000



When Arsenal's final-ever European night at Highbury was interrupted by a squirrel on the pitch, it earned the nickname 'Nutty Nigel' – after an enduring ex-defender. Nigel Winterburn was mad, alright – but he was also a superb left-back who also scored the occasional rocket for the Gunners. He won three titles with Arsenal and was severely underappreciated by England.



37 GEORGE ARMSTRONG
1961-1977



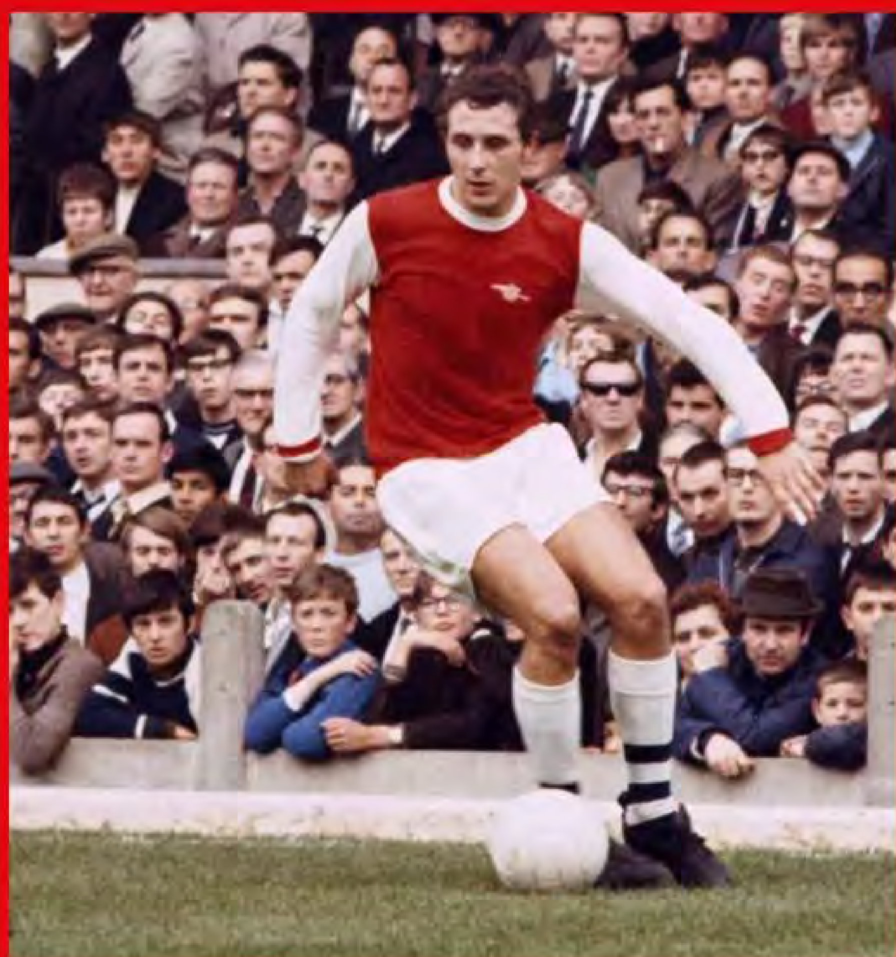
The Highbury clock could have kept its time to George Armstrong's dependable jaunts down the wing. An ever-present in Arsenal's 1971 Double-winning side, Armstrong was a key creator, setting up the Ray Kennedy goal that won the title and providing much-needed width. He made 500 league appearances – and shone in most of them.



36 ASHLEY COLE
1999-2006

Things may have ended in ignominy for Ashley Cole at Arsenal – but during his time on the red side of London, he rose to define the modern full-back. Cole came through the ranks at Arsenal and changed the landscape for left-backs: he'd get forward and overlap and yet no one could beat him for pace one-on-one.

Images David Rogers/Getty Images (Lauren), Allsport/Getty Images (Winterburn), Bob Thomas Sports Photography via Getty Images (Armstrong) Ross Kinnaird/Getty Images (Cole)

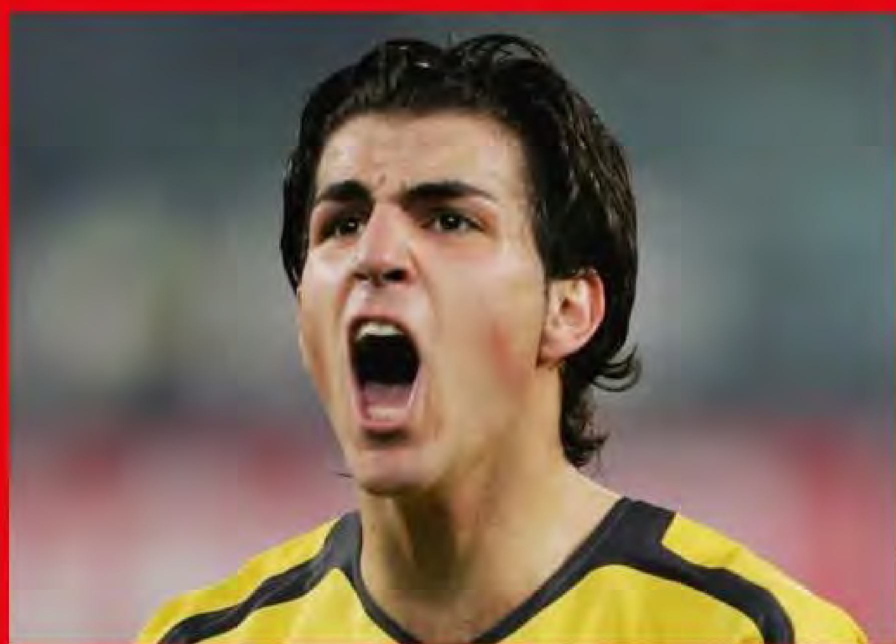


35 JOHN RADFORD
1964-1976

Only three men have scored more goals than John Radford in an Arsenal shirt. But while the Gunners' history is littered with stylish strikers who ignited the imagination, Yorkshireman Radford was more of a no-frills frontman.

Radford recorded 149 strikes for Arsenal in his 12 years at the club, blossoming under Bertie Mee's stewardship of the team. He was an old-school centre-forward, who loved to get stuck in and combine with his wingers – and he was unselfish too, setting up both goals in the 1971 FA Cup Final.

His phenomenal scoring record slowly dropped off but his commitment never did. Radford is still Arsenal's youngest-ever hat-trick scorer too – and holds a special place in the hearts of those who watched him.

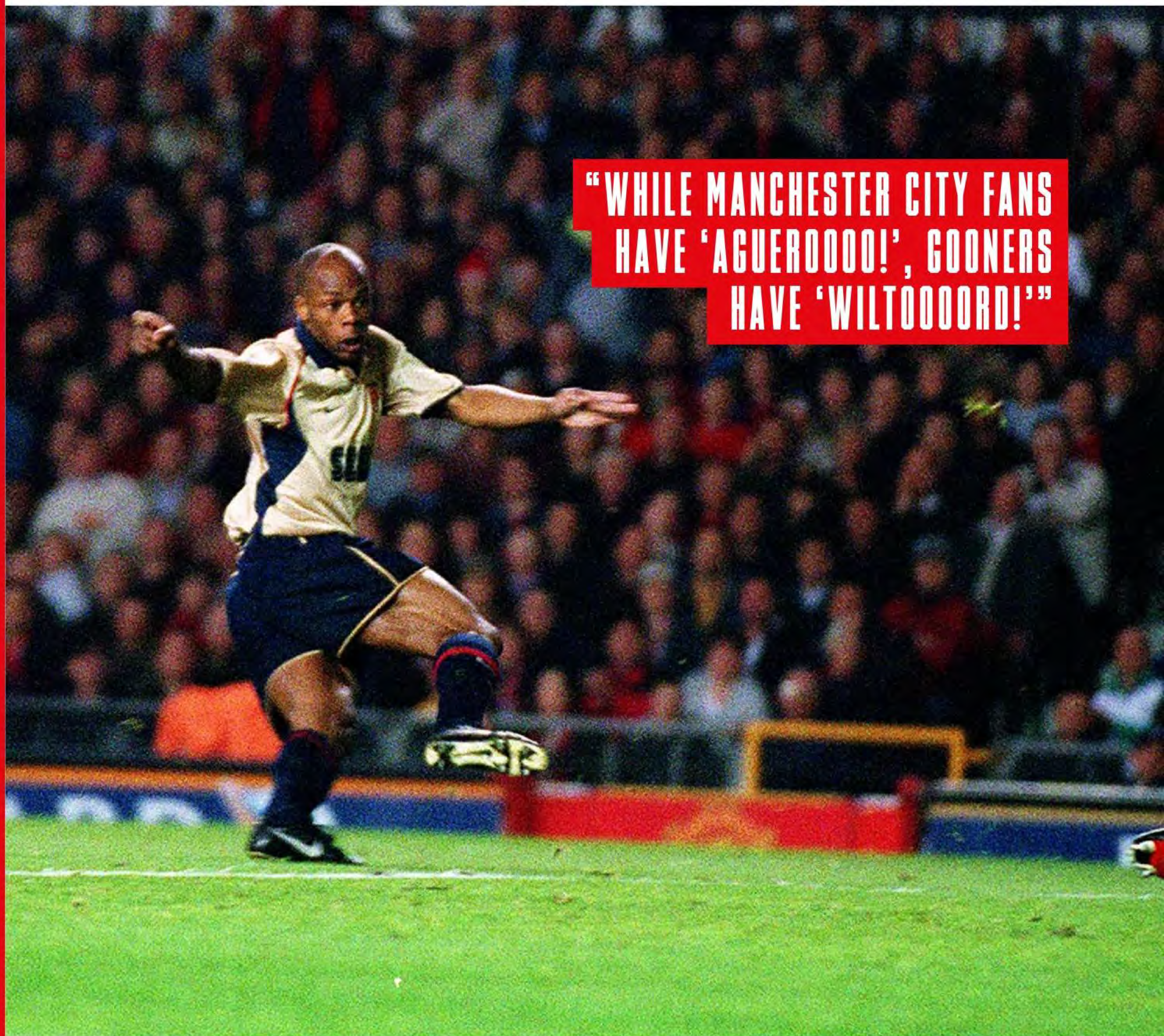


34 CESC FABREGAS
2003-2011

Cesc Fabregas would redefine the direction of Arsenal FC under Arsene Wenger, when he danced across the Highbury pitch as a precocious teenager. For so long, Arsenal had been all about power and might – but this Catalan kid recalibrated the focus to be on technical excellence from diminutive midfielders.

Fabregas had vision like no Arsenal star before him and a maturity from the age of 16. He could control games effortlessly, bending defences to his will and he led by example across the field. He was a key figure when Arsenal made the 2006 Champions League Final and when he picked up the captaincy, he became an icon of the Emirates era.

Images Don Morley/Allsport/Getty Images (Radford), Laurence Griffiths/Getty Images (Fabregas), Stuart MacFarlane/Arsenal FC via Getty Images (Wiltord), Mark Leech/Offside/Getty Images (Nicholas)



"WHILE MANCHESTER CITY FANS HAVE 'AGUEROOOO!', GOONERS HAVE 'WILTOOOORD!'"

33 SYLVAIN WILTORD
2000-2004



While Manchester City fans have "Agueroooo!", Gooners have "Wiltoooord!", the iconic Martin Tyler scream when Arsenal's Super Sylvain scored the winner at Old Trafford in 2002, clinching the first part of a historic Double.

Wiltord was a record signing, having scored in the Euro 2000 Final. The Frenchman played either out wide or up front and was pacy, strong and a man for the big occasion, netting for the Gunners consistently in his four years at the club. While there were plenty of flashier names in North London though, Wiltord will forever be remembered as a player who rotated often but got the job done – he scored some important goals along the way, too.

32 CHARLIE NICHOLAS
1983-1988



Charlie Nicholas was described as "the most exciting player to emerge in Britain since George Best" when he signed for Arsenal in 1983 – no pressure then.

'Champagne Charlie' was a luxury player of extravagant skill, who could turn a match on its head on a whim. Two goals in a Boxing Day fixture against Tottenham proved that the season he joined, while the forward landed Arsenal's Player of the Year award in 1984. Nicholas netted twice in the League Cup Final of 1987 to become a Wembley hero for the Gunners and perhaps his star quality was dimmed by the lack of a great strike partner – but for a while, he glittered at Highbury.





31 STEVE BOULD
1988-1999





George Graham had a novel form of scouting. He would ask his secretary to send over local newspapers to find out which players journalists were raving about – and that's how he found Lee Dixon. He sent a scout to watch the right-back, only for a recommendation to be made of Steve Bould, too.

Bould never let that scout down. He was a no-nonsense defender with brawn and brain; positionally flawless, strong in the tackle and Tony Adams' right-hand man. In 1989, he was Arsenal's number 10, the third centre-back in Graham's back five at Anfield that won the league – and just like he did that night, he would nullify strikers effortlessly week in, week out.

30 ALEX JAMES
1929-1937



"There wasn't much about him physically, but he had sublime skills and the knack of letting the ball do the work," the great Tom Finney said of Alex James. The Scot was recognisable by his baggy shorts and gelled hair and later drew comparisons to Dennis Bergkamp for his elegance.

James won six trophies at Arsenal in Herbert Chapman's golden era, playing as a deep-lying lynchpin at a time when that kind of role didn't really exist. He was the most intelligent player on any field, had unbelievable passing range and he could cushion a ball with ease. It wasn't just Tom Finney – he became an inspiration for countless players of his day.



29 NWANKWO KANU
1999-2004

Nwankwo Kanu was embroiled in controversy on his Arsenal debut when the striker failed to play the ball back to Sheffield United in the FA Cup – and Arsenal offered to replay the tie. Thankfully, he more than recovered to earn the fans' adulation.

With long legs, deceptive pace and an eye for the spectacular, Kanu became a cult hero at Arsenal with his infectious individuality. Whether it was his incredible hat-trick against Chelsea – complete with a third goal from an impossibly tight angle – or his two-fingered 'gunner' salute when he scored, the Nigerian loved to grab the spotlight; he also had a fantastic knack for getting a goal when he'd come off the bench.



28 TED DRAKE
1934-1945



Ted Drake scored seven goals in a single match against Aston Villa in 1935. It was a club record and top flight record in England that still stands today – but Drake was unhappy that an eighth strike went over the line, only for the referee to rule it out. Where was VAR when he needed it?

The no.9 was a quintessential Arsenal forward blessed with speed, bravery and ferocious shot power. Drake was prolific in his day too, the perfect focal point in the Gunners' side, scoring 124 goals in 167 league games. He's still the club's joint-fifth highest goalscorer of all time and won two league titles and an FA Cup while a Gunner.



27 KOLO TOURE
2002-2009

When he was brought in for a trial with Arsenal, Kolo Toure was so keen to impress that he accidentally floored Arsene Wenger with a two-footed lunge. Typically, Wenger appreciated his passion and signed him up.

The effervescent Ivorian was soon converted from a midfielder into a defender alongside Sol Campbell, as Wenger looked to rebuild the classic back four into something a little more modern. Toure was powerful, pacy and had lightning reactions, making him perfect in the backline. He matured into an Invincible but he never lost that enthusiasm for defending and throwing himself into the game. He remains one of Arsenal's most underrated players of a platinum era of success.

Images Popperfoto via Getty Images (Bould), J. Gaiger/Topical Press Agency/Getty Images (James), Clive Brunskil /Allsport/ Getty Images (Kanu), Fox Photos/Hulton Archive/Getty Images (Drake), Nicolas Asfouri/AFP via Getty Images (Toure)

26 FRANK McLINTOCK

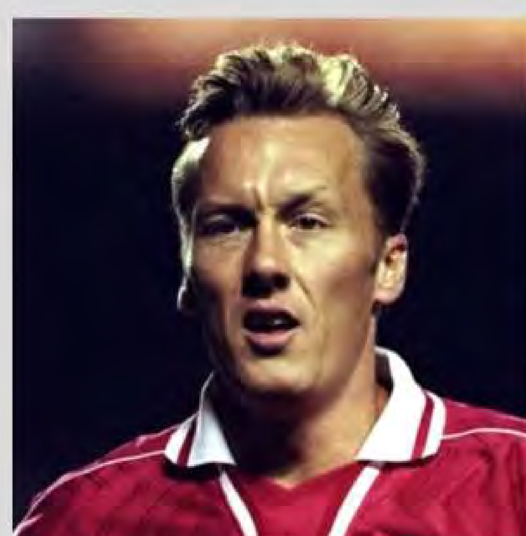
1964-1973



Nottingham Forest striker John Barnwell was sold by Arsenal to raise the capital to sign £80,000 Frank McLintock. You can imagine the scenes when on his debut, McLintock accidentally assisted Barnwell to score a simple tap-in. In fact, McLintock's early years at Arsenal were so poor that he insisted Arsenal drop the white sleeves, since it was so hard to live up to the famous kit.

Thankfully, McLintock became a leader on the field and not just a dedicated follower of fashion. The Gunners captain during the 1971 Double-winning side, McLintock was named FWA Footballer of the Year during the campaign and dragged the team across the line in key results during the season.

25 LEE DIXON
1988-2002



Arsene Wenger later admitted to Lee Dixon that he didn't think he'd play as long as he did. While the right-back was always hard-working and tirelessly drove up and down the right for Arsenal, it was his intelligence as a defender that cemented his longevity.

Dixon was always in the right place at the right time. He was 25 when he won his first title with Arsenal in that dramatic final match at Anfield in 1989, and he went on to become one of the club's most dependable figures. Virtually no one ever challenged him for his position – and he was imperious as a full-back for well over decade.



24 EMMANUEL PETIT
1997-2000

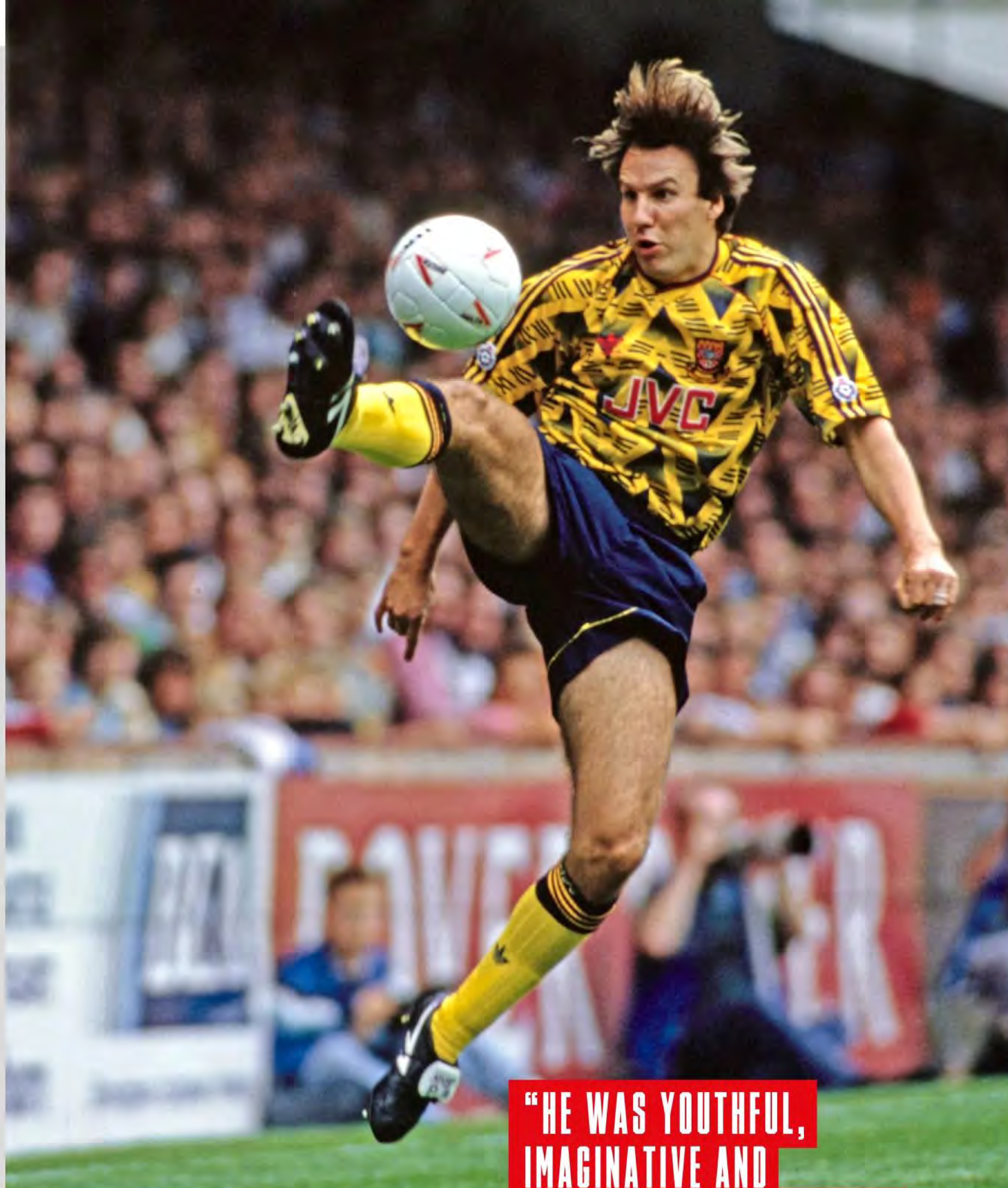
Emmanuel Petit remains the only Arsenal player to have ever scored in a World Cup Final, having scored the third for France in 1998. The midfielder was brought by Wenger across from his old team Monaco and had an instant impact for the Gunners, winning the Double alongside Patrick Vieira. The pair worked in perfect tandem, covering the pitch with grit and gusto, while Petit was also capable of an out-of-the-box drive into the top corner of the net. He may have only spent three years in North London but the Frenchman remains a staple of a classic side – and one of the '90s' greatest Premier League imports.

23 KENNY SANSOM
1980-1988

Arsenal signed Kenny Sansom in exchange for Clive Allen, who they'd made the most expensive teenager in world football just a few weeks earlier. While it was certainly an odd move, it's difficult to argue that it wasn't a phenomenal deal for the Gunners.

Sansom would become one of the best left-backs in British football and an ever-present for Arsenal during his first season. He was steady, strong and had impeccable stamina, barely missing a minute for the club. He quickly became a fan favourite and would later take on the captaincy. He was simply the complete defender, winning the League Cup in 1987 and earning 86 England caps.





"HE WAS YOUTHFUL, IMAGINATIVE AND UNPREDICTABLE – HE SOON BECAME A HOUSEHOLD NAME"

22 PAUL MERSON

1985-1997



Paul Merson was an integral part of Arsenal's championship win in 1989 and scored another 13 goals when the Gunners retained their title in 1991. He was youthful, imaginative and unpredictable – and he soon became a household name with his trademark flair and hard running.

But Merse didn't always find it easy and for all his natural ability, it was perhaps his graft which made him a true great. After admitting his addictions in 1994, the Londoner came back to play over 100 games in a row for the Arsenal, as fans welcomed him back as a hero. He's remembered for his mercurial spirit – but beneath his incredible abilities, there was steely resolve, too.





21 MARC OVERMARS

1997-2000

"I like English football because there is more pace," Marc Overmars said when he joined Arsenal in 1997. "With my speed and quality I think it will be good for me here."

While the Dutchman took a while to hit top speed in an Arsenal shirt, he didn't look back once he got there. Overmars was quicksilver down the left and equally adept on either foot, cutting in to score or crossing to assist teammates.

A key figure in Wenger's first Double in 1998, Overmars scored the crucial winner away to Manchester United in the league and the opener in the FA Cup Final.



20 GILBERTO SILVA

2002-2008

Arsene Wenger once said that Gilberto Silva was the most underrated player he'd ever worked with. "He was naturally discreet," the Frenchman said of the World Cup winner, who would sweep up behind the more attacking players and break up play on counterattacks.

Gilberto arrived at Arsenal having never played in European football before and instantly won admirers with his calmness on the ball and excellent reading of the game. He was the perfect companion to the more energetic, eye-catching Patrick Vieira, but just as important to the Arsenal side that went unbeaten for 49 matches. When Arsenal reached the Champions League Final in 2006, the Brazilian was the lynchpin of the midfield.

"You only realise how much you miss him when he doesn't play," Wenger said of the man known as 'the invisible wall'. He may not have made the headlines but his presence was integral to the side's success.



19 BOB WILSON

1963-1974

Bob Wilson would've signed for Manchester United were it not for his father telling him, "Och son, football's not a proper job." He studied to be a teacher at Loughborough College instead, only turning professional at the age of 23.

But despite his father's protestations, Wilson became one of the most influential British goalkeepers of the 20th century. He was incredibly brave, rushing out at strikers' feet like his hero Bert Trautmann and commanding his box with energy and immense leadership. Wilson was the custodian when Arsenal won the Fairs Cup in 1970 and the Double a year later.

Wilson was a trustworthy figure in one of the greatest Arsenal sides ever – and a true servant to the club, he remained with Arsenal decades later, acting as David Seaman's coach across two more Doubles. An Arsenal man through and through, he's one of the most loved people to have ever walked through those hallowed Marble Halls.

Images A. Jones/Daily Express/Hulton Archive/Getty Images (McLintock), Ben Radford/Allsport/Getty Images (Dixon, Petit), Bob Thomas Sports Photography via Getty Images (Sansom), Allsport/Getty Images/Hulton Archive (Merson), Shaun Botterill/Getty Images (Overmars), Mike Hewitt/Getty Images (Silva), Ray Wright/Mark Leech Sports Photography/Getty Images (Wilson)

18 ALAN SMITH
1987-1995

In his first season at Leicester City, Alan Smith scored 13 goals in a strike partnership with Gary Lineker. While Lineker went on to play for Tottenham, Smith moved to the red side of North London – and immortalised himself at Anfield in 1989.

Smith scored the first goal in the 2-0 victory that brought the title back to Highbury that night, scooping the Golden Boot in the process. He netted another 114 goals for the Gunners throughout his career, winning the Golden Boot again en route to the 1991 title and scoring the winner in the 1994 Cup Winners' Cup Final. Smith was nimble and agile, with quick reactions in the box and he was tall, too – frequently he'd outjump defenders to turn the ball home, making him a perfect striker, whatever the style of play.

With decisive goals in moments that mattered, Smith knew exactly when to make his talents count. The striker was the man for all moments for the Gunners.





17 DAVID ROCASTLE
1985-1992

In March 2001, David Rocastle passed away, at just 33. He is still greatly missed by everyone at Arsenal, as a gentleman and a bringer of brilliance.

'Rocky' burst through the ranks at Highbury, demonstrating flair and flamboyance in abundance. He was sharp and pacy, able to cover ground and operated either out wide or in the centre for the Gunners, becoming a key figure when Arsenal won the title in 1989. Fans would rise to their feet whenever he got the ball, as this Lewisham-born attacker was capable of the unexpected whenever he found space.

Rocastle would win another title in 1991, cementing his place as a universally loved figure among Arsenal fans. His legacy is that the likes of Ian Wright watched him and felt like if he could do it, so could they. Fittingly, the indoor centre at Arsenal's academy is named after him: Rocky was a shining light who continues to glow for so many.





16 PAT JENNINGS
1977-1985

Pat Jennings was never a goalkeeper for the spectacular. He was so good at knowing exactly where to stand on his line that he barely had to move to make a save. In fact, so unspectacular was Jennings, he moved from Tottenham to Arsenal and he's still equally loved and respected by both sides.

Jennings played over 200 times in the league for the Gunners during an eight-year spell. Though Arsenal only won the 1979 FA Cup during his time with the club, he was an imperious figure between the sticks with Arsenal and became a favourite with fans for his steady and calm presence. Bob Wilson would remark that his successor was the polar opposite to him in his composure in goal.

"HE WAS AN IMPERIOUS FIGURE BETWEEN THE STICKS"

Jennings played for Arsenal until 1985 – which was impressive considering that Spurs let him go not expecting him to have much left in the tank. He still ranks as one of Britain's finest-ever stoppers.



15 PAT RICE

1967-1980

"It really and truthfully is great to be thought of so highly by the Arsenal fans and I hope that I will always have that rapport with them," Pat Rice once said. He perhaps still doesn't realise quite how loved he is by supporters.

The right-back saw highs and lows in a 13-year playing career at Highbury – and stuck by the club throughout. He emerged as a superb defender for Bertie Mee, becoming a cornerstone in Arsenal's 1971 Double-winning side, but as the team around him fragmented, Rice remained. He was integral in helping guide the Gunners away from relegation in the mid-'70s and earned the captaincy in 1977.

Rice then got his hands on the FA Cup once more in 1979 and returned in the Wenger years as assistant manager. The Northern Irishman has come to represent the graft and loyalty that Gooners demand from their stars – and few have given more of their life to the club than Pat Rice.



14 RAY PARLOUR

1992-2004

In the best week of Ray Parlour's career, the 'Romford Pele' managed to score a worldie in an FA Cup Final win, before getting the Man of the Match award at Old Trafford, as Arsenal completed the Double in 2002. According to the man himself, practically everyone he bumped into between those two games wanted to buy him a pint.

They still do, too. The midfielder was a cult hero for his work rate, his passing and his ability to combine with other players – but he never lost the everyman touch that made him a favourite with Gooners down the pub. Parlour could be counted on, wherever he played across the midfield and as he matured from a wiry 19 year old into an assured presence in midfield, the unsung hero of so many trophy wins became a leader for the Gunners that Arsene Wenger would lean on in key moments.



"HE'S ARSENAL THROUGH AND THROUGH, NOW"

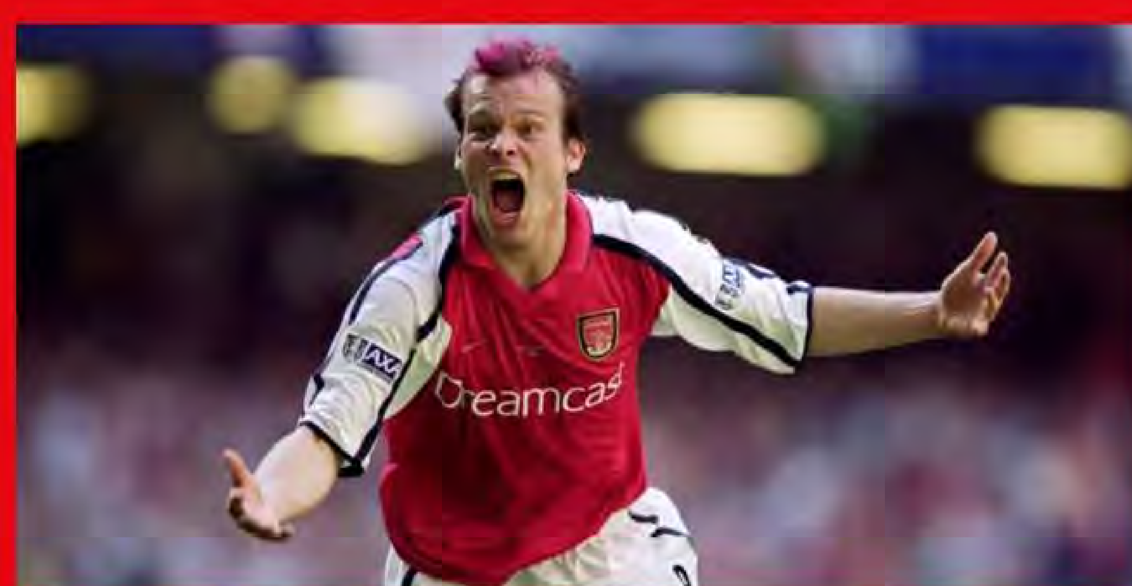
13 SOL CAMPBELL

2001-2006, 2010

Sol Campbell might just be the greatest signing that Arsenal ever made. Not only did he cost absolutely nothing, he won two Premier League titles, correcting a problem position for the Gunners – and, to top it all off, his move came from bitter rivals Tottenham.

Campbell was already a hero for defecting from Spurs, but his commanding performances at the heart of the Gunners' defence made him a fans' favourite. He led by example, giving Arsenal strength, heart and pace in the backline and he elevated his game to become one of the best centre-backs in the world at Highbury. That he helped win the title at White Hart Lane merely made him an Arsenal legend.

It was Campbell who later scored the goal in the Champions League Final that made fans dream and he also oversaw the transition away from Tony Adams in defence and towards a new era. He played at Tottenham longer – but he's Arsenal through and through, now.



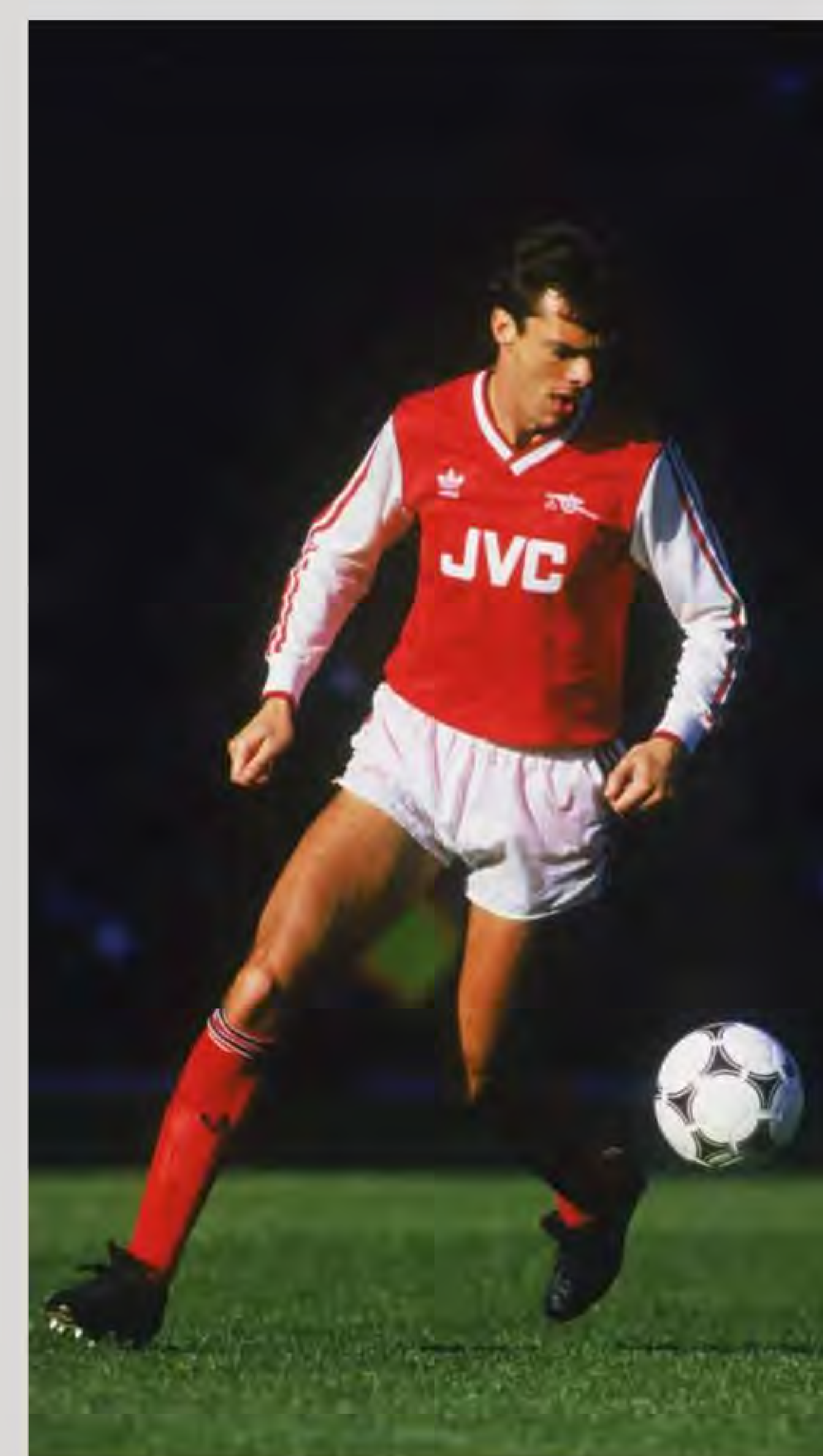
12 FREDDIE LJUNGBERG

1998-2007

There was perhaps no bigger big-game player for Arsenal than Freddie Ljungberg. The super Swede was always involved when the team needed him most, whether that was a Champions League goal, a strike against Manchester United or in a knockout cup match. In fact, Ljungberg will be remembered most as the man who scored two FA Cup Final goals for the Gunners.

But not just a finisher, Ljungberg was an all-round tour de force who typified the energetic, physical brand of football that Wenger brought to North London. Ljungberg was short, quick and would make darting runs late into the box to finish off chances – and he had a fiery side, too; he loved to get involved in the defensive side of the game.

If you grew up supporting Ljungberg, the chances are that you or someone you know dyed your hair red because of this whirlwind winger. He's still a club favourite all these years on.



11 DAVID O'LEARY

1975-1993

David O'Leary made a record 722 appearances for Arsenal. That will probably never be broken – and it's fitting that such an excellent defender and loyal servant should forever hold that record.

The Irish international made his debut as an exuberant 17 year old and quickly settled down to become one of the most elegant, unassuming defenders of a generation. O'Leary's composure fed through to the rest of the team, and he became the youngest player to break the 100 and 200-match milestones for the Gunners, and over all of that time, he led with distinction and class. The centre-back still played over 20 times when the North Londoners won the title in 1989, before winning it again in 1991.

In his final season, O'Leary won the 1993 League Cup and FA Cup; that he'd also been involved in the 1979 Wembley success was an incredible example of his longevity. But it's not just how long he played that's impressive, he was one of Arsenal's greatest-ever defenders, too.

Images Bob Thomas Sports Photography via Getty Images (Smith, Jennings, Rice), Allsport UK/Getty Images (Rocastle), Stuart MacFarlane/Arsenal FC via Getty Images (Parlour), Matthew Lewis/Getty Images (Campbell), Clive Brunskill /Allsport/Getty Images (Ljungberg), David Cannon/Getty Images (O'Leary)

10 CLIFF BASTIN
1929-1947

That Cliff Bastin's name is still mentioned as one of the greatest to have ever played for Arsenal, nearly 100 years after his debut, is testament not just to the goals he scored – but the style with which he played.

Bastin signed for Arsenal as a teenager and those who have only heard his name and his scoring record may be surprised to realise he wasn't a centre-forward. Instead, he played much of his career as an inside-left – even becoming more of a creator when Alex James was injured – and still managed to net 178 in 395 games for the Gunners.

It was almost 50 years after he retired that Bastin's unbelievable striking record was to be broken. He achieved incredible things in another era of the game but Bastin's exploits transcended Herbert Chapman's generation. He is simply one of the greatest goalscorers of all time – and of any time.





09 CHARLIE GEORGE
1968-1975

Charlie George watched Arsenal from the terraces as a boy. As a man, he wrote himself into the club's history with one of the most iconic FA Cup moments ever.

It was George's volley that thundered past Liverpool's Ray Clemence to win the 1971 FA Cup Final for Arsenal. Wembley erupted with joy, as the hero of the hour lay on his back, arms spread wide – and a generation of Gooners copied it in the playground.

George won the Double that season as a swaggering attacking midfielder and over the course of his Gunners career, he'd provide plenty more moments of magic. While injuries affected just how good he would become, George will forever be remembered as one of the first fans labelled as 'The King of Highbury' and as a legend who brought the house down with flashes of genius; one, in particular, will never be forgotten.



08 DAVID SEAMAN
1990-2003

1-0 to the Arsenal just wouldn't have been possible without David Seaman. At his peak, the goalkeeper became a household name and a national treasure – and though he cost a British record fee for a goalkeeper when he moved for £1.3m, it was an absolute bargain for George Graham.

Seaman conceded just 18 goals as Arsenal stormed to the 1990-91 title, only losing once along the way. The Yorkshireman earned the nickname 'Safe Hands' and as the Gunners established themselves as cup specialists, Seaman thrived as a match-winner.

The custodian was a rock for two Doubles under Arsene Wenger and will forever be known for the fingertip claw that he made against Sheffield United in the FA Cup semi in 2003, a save many still believe to be one of the greatest of all time. It's thanks to him that Arsenal made that final – and he captained them to the trophy just weeks later in his final match for the club. Fittingly, he earned a clean sheet, too.

07 LIAM BRADY
1973-1980

Liam Brady was one of the most naturally gifted players to ever pull on the red and white shirt. He was strong, quick, had incredible vision and a ferocious shot, and his footballing brain was second to none – he simply made football fun.

And in an Arsenal team that faltered in the mid-'70s, 'Chippy' was a rare bright spark. The Irishman became an unstoppable playmaker for the attack ahead of him as the Gunners reached three FA Cup Finals in a row between 1978 and 1980, winning in

"HIS FOOTBALLING BRAIN WAS SECOND TO NONE"

1979. It was Brady who started the move for the winner – although an equally memorable piece of his genius came in a 5-0 victory against Tottenham, as he looped a long-range screamer into the top corner.

Brady was the club's Player of the Year three times and PFA Players' Player of the Year in 1979. Rarely had Highbury seen such a natural superstar in his pomp – and he's still loved by all those he enthralled.



Images Don Morley/Allsport/Getty Images (George), Gary M. Prior/Getty Images (Seaman), Allsport UK/Getty Images (Brady)

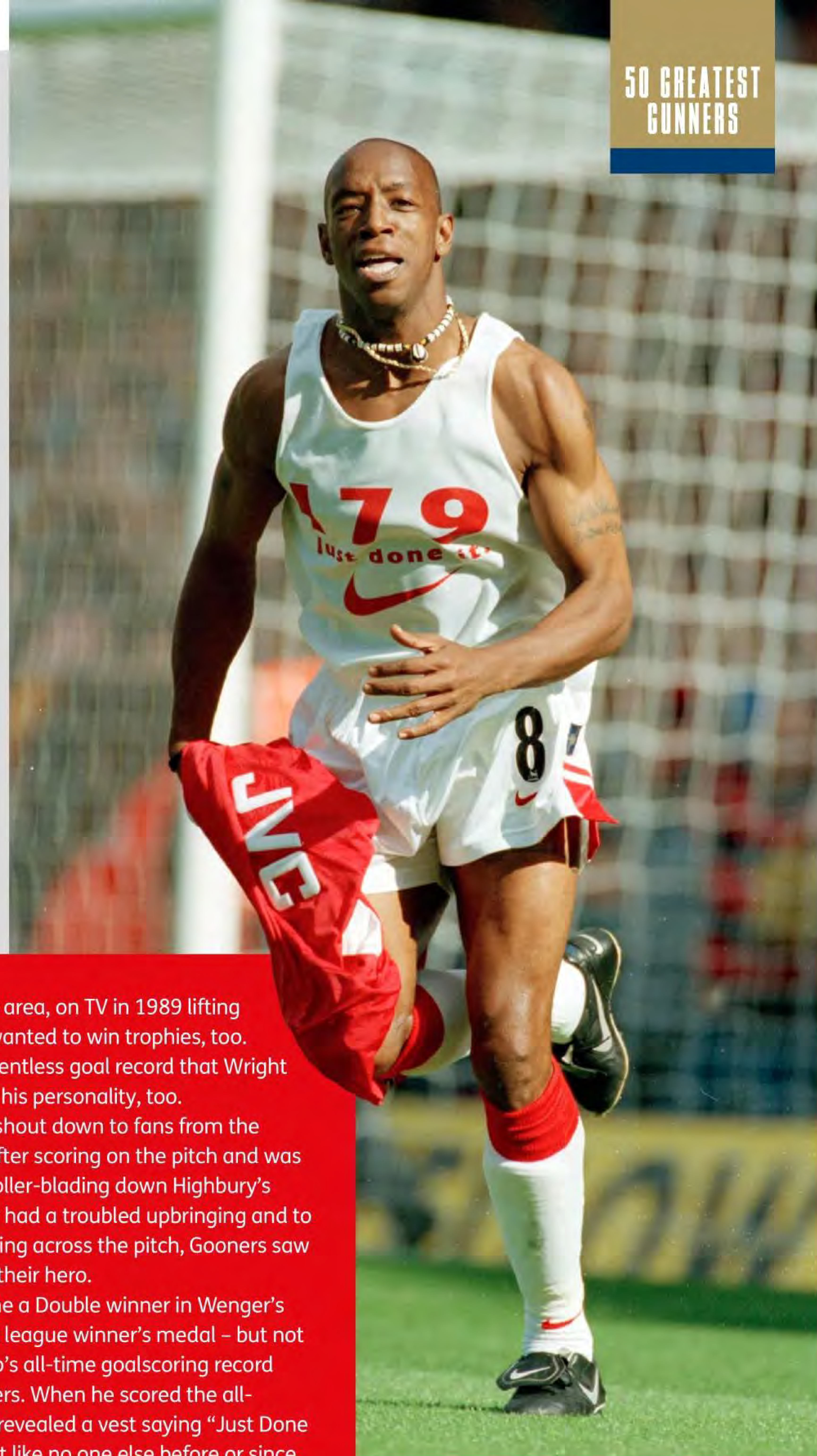


06 ROBERT PIRES
2000-2006

Robert Pires struggled early on at Arsenal due to the physicality of the game. Arsene Wenger had to temper the way he spoke to the Frenchman for fear of him going into his shell – he wasn't like the rougher, tougher beasts that the Gunners had made their name bullying the league with.

Pires was cultured, deft and delicate – and that's why fans loved him – though his penchant for scoring in the North London Derby helped too, of course. His teammates loved him too: when an injured Pires lifted the Premier League title in 2002, his colleagues all took to their knees to praise him.

Pires's Arsenal career ended in a first-half substitution, as the Gunners went down to ten men in the 2006 Champions League Final. It was necessary, but not a fitting end for one of the most incredible wide players of his time.



05 IAN WRIGHT
1991-1998

At the age of 22, Ian Wright was a bricklayer. He was almost 30 when the Premier League era began. That he not only became an Arsenal legend in his playing career, but also the Gunners' top scorer, is an incredible testament to the man's determination, goalscoring ability and incredible graft.

'Wrighty' signed for the Gunners in 1991 after six years impressing with Crystal Palace. He'd watched David Rocastle, a boy from his area, on TV in 1989 lifting the title – and now he wanted to win trophies, too. But it wasn't just the relentless goal record that Wright won over fans with, but his personality, too.

Arsenal's no.8 would shout down to fans from the dressing room, dance after scoring on the pitch and was even reprimanded for roller-blading down Highbury's Marble Halls. The striker had a troubled upbringing and to see him gleefully bouncing across the pitch, Gooners saw a part of themselves in their hero.

In 1997-98, he became a Double winner in Wenger's side and finally got that league winner's medal – but not before breaking the club's all-time goalscoring record against Bolton Wanderers. When he scored the all-important goal, Wright revealed a vest saying "Just Done It" – and boy did he do it like no one else before or since.



04 PATRICK VIEIRA
1996-2006

Arsene Wenger arrived at Arsenal as a complete unknown and brought a young French midfielder with him. While Wenger needed a little time to settle before he could be judged, the Frenchman claimed that everyone took one look at Patrick Vieira and thought the same thing: "at least he brings good players with him".

Vieira was one of the greatest midfielders to ever play the game. Tall and strong, he was a defensive behemoth and loved a crunching tackle – but he'd carry the ball, too. He would be involved in all phases of play, he would charge across the pitch and at his very best, no one could get near him.

He took to English football immediately and would become a champion in 1998 alongside Emmanuel Petit, before carrying the midfield on his own for a second Double in 2002. Vieira grew into a leader too, ironing out the immaturity in his game to become the key figure in the Highbury midfield when Arsenal went unbeaten in 2004.

A year later, he'd leave North London as an FA Cup winner once more, scoring the final penalty in the shootout victory over Manchester United. It was an exquisite full stop to a career in which he dominated every midfield he played in – Arsenal haven't been the same since he's gone.

> "VIEIRA WAS ONE OF THE GREATEST MIDFIELDERS TO EVER PLAY THE GAME"

Images Bob Thomas Sports Photography via Getty Images (Bastin, Wright), Stuart MacFarlane/Arsenal FC via Getty Images (Pires, Vieira)



"HE EVEN ADAPTED UNDER ARSENE WENGER TO BE BETTER ON THE BALL, GOING ON DARING RUNS FROM DEFENCE"

03 TONY ADAMS

1983-2002

Tony Adams once said that if you play for the name on the front of the shirt, the fans will remember the name on the back. Fans themselves still call the centre-back 'Mr Arsenal' even to this day – and many across the game still regard him as one of the greatest captains football has ever seen.

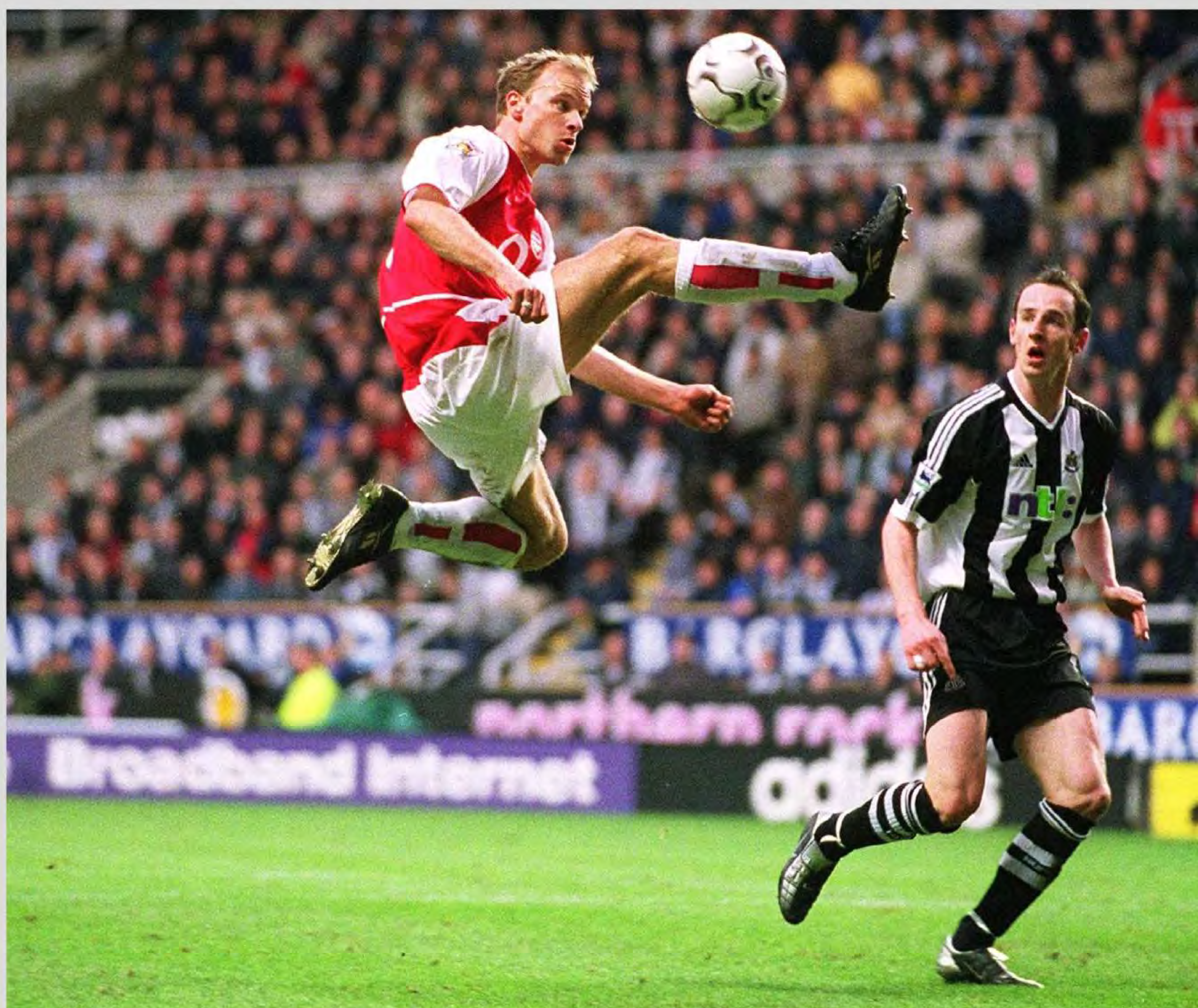
Adams was everything that Arsenal held in esteem for the 19 years that he served the club: brave, physical and an incredible reader of the game. He was the man that everyone else looked up to, with George Graham building his back four around him and making him captain of the club at just 21. In 1989, he'd be the rock at the heart of the title-winning defence.

But Adams never had it easy. An alcoholic, he battled addiction and came out the other side, returning to football as good as he ever was. He even adapted under Arsene Wenger to be better on the ball, even going on daring runs from defence – and in the final game of 1997-98, he scored the last goal of the season to bring the title to Highbury.

Adams' celebration that day, arms open wide, is now cast in bronze in a statue outside the Emirates. He is the ultimate fans' favourite and a true one-club man.

02 DENNIS BERGKAMP

1995-2006



Dennis Bergkamp pulled up to a petrol station when he arrived in England in 1995 and just happened to bump into his new teammate, Ian Wright. Wright was over the moon, screaming with glee – and he wasn't the only one.

Arsenal signed a genuine superstar when the non-flying Dutchman landed in the mid-'90s. He had been on Ballon d'Or shortlists, was a star with the Netherlands and he was here in North London to give Arsenal the spark that they needed. And though his goal record never particularly stood out, the moments of pure imagination that he'd provide in his 11 years at the Gunners proved to last a lifetime.

One month, he had the top three to himself in the BBC's Goal of the Month competition. He would score screamers, defy gravity and have fans talking about whether or not he meant what he'd achieved, decades later. Bergkamp was one of the most talented footballers to grace the Premier League and his genius led Arsenal to three title wins.

Thierry Henry would later say that his strike partner was the greatest player he'd ever played with, over the likes of Lionel Messi and Zinedine Zidane. Everything Bergkamp did was graceful and poetic – and he still inspires, years later.

01 THIERRY HENRY

1999-2007, 2011

Thierry Henry signed for Arsenal as a misfit. He left as the all-time scorer, a leader, a legend and one of the greatest players of all time.

When he arrived the Frenchman was given a VHS tape of Ian Wright by vice-chairman David Dein, with the simple instructions to just copy the master at work and he would be fine. Things took a little while to click for Henry in an Arsenal shirt, as he was frustrated with learning how to play up front – but when Wenger told him to ask himself how he could help the team, something clicked within him.

There has never been a more complete forward in the Premier League. Henry racked up four Golden Boots and the season that he didn't win it, he assisted 20 Premier League goals: no one has surpassed that. He was magnificent as Arsenal won the Double in 2002, and otherworldly as he scored 30 and Arsenal went unbeaten in 2003-04. In 2006, he put the Gunners on his back and led them to a Champions League Final.

He has transcended the club to be recognised as one of the classiest, most devastating and most skilful footballers to have ever lived. There has never been anyone like him – at Arsenal or anywhere else.



"HE WAS MAGNIFICENT AS ARSENAL WON THE DOUBLE IN 2002, AND OTHERWORLDLY AS HE SCORED 30 AND ARSENAL WENT UNBEATEN IN 2003-04"

Images Gary M.Prior/ Allsport/Getty Images (Adams), Stuart MacFarlane/Arsenal FC via Getty Images (Bergkamp), Mark Thompson/Getty Images (Henry fans), Dan Kitwood/Getty Images (Henry statue)

In three years, Mikel Arteta's non-negotiables took the Gunners from a toxic crisis at his December 2019 arrival to five points clear on top of the Premier League. FFT speaks to players, coaches and fans to find out how the Basque did it

FROM THE FFT ARCHIVES:
JANUARY 2023

ARTistic ETiquette Arsenal

Words Mark White
Additional reporting Arthur Renard

When Pep Guardiola's name appears on your phone, you take the call. You stop what you are doing. He demands nothing less than your sole focus. It's as if he's put the rest of the world on mute for the duration he has your attention.

Mikel Arteta first met this hypnotic man many years earlier. He had grown up idolising this magician who could bend space, time and football to his will, long before the Catalan coaching *sensei* learned to choreograph whole teams to do the same. A 16-year-old Arteta would make his Barcelona B debut as a substitute for Guardiola, then-club captain and 11 years his protégé's senior. The former never made a senior Barcelona appearance but, with the pair both schooled by Johan Cruyff principles and with a contacts book in common, they kept in touch. And, a decade and a half later, Arteta received the call that would adjust his career's sails.

It was now April 2012. The days were getting longer and Arteta's first season wearing Arsenal red and white was drawing to a close. Guardiola wasn't ringing to offer his fellow La Masia alumnus a job – that was another conversation for another timeline. He had simply rung an old acquaintance to pick his brain about Chelsea, Barcelona's next opponents in the Champions League.

Arteta gave his two cents. He explained succinctly the strengths and weaknesses of an outfit he had recently helped Arsenal to humble 5-3 at Stamford Bridge. He had even set up Robin van Persie's injury-time hat-trick goal. Pep listened intently. "I must ask his opinion more often," he said as he hung up.

As compliments go, there are few bigger in the game than the most revered manager of a generation asking for a tactical take from an uncapped 30-year-old midfielder. It was an early endorsement of a football mind that Guardiola would mine on a regular basis.



"FIRSTLY, I'LL HAVE EVERYONE 120 PER CENT COMMITTED – IF NOT, YOU DON'T PLAY FOR ME"

"THAT WAS SO ARTETA"

Guardiola grew up fascinated by British football's romance and passion, admiring from afar its stacked pyramid, cup replays and travelling support. Arteta never had the luxury of distance. Unlike his playing and coaching mentor, he didn't leave his boyhood club of Barcelona on his own terms.

Clockwise from top When Rangers had Stephen Mangan in midfield; "Mikel, give us your Blue Steel"; winning the Toffees fans' hearts

A gap year away at Paris Saint-Germain in 2001-02 – playing alongside Ronaldinho, Jay-Jay Okocha, Mauricio Pochettino and other big names – culminated in Barça spitting Arteta out to Rangers. He was just 20. The midfielder picked up English with a Glaswegian twang and learned a few choice swear words, as those who have seen *All or Nothing* can testify, before returning home to San Sebastian and Real Sociedad.

That didn't pan out, either. In the early summer of 2004, La Real planned to build their midfield around Arteta and Xabi Alonso – childhood friends and neighbours on Calle Matia, a short throw-in from the Playa de la Concha city-centre beach where they once honed their craft – but within six months the Basque pair were opposing generals in the Merseyside divide. By January 2005, Arteta was a Blue and Alonso was a Red.

A cultured midfield metronome, able to break defensive lines with his eyes closed, was forged in British football's fire. Arteta learned to fight at Ibrox, then Goodison, winning Evertonian hearts just as much for his spirit when tempers rose as for his dictating of the match tempo in calmer moments. After seven and a half seasons, and with his 30th birthday approaching, he wondered if he would ever get his big move. In August 2011, Arsene Wenger answered.

"The impact of his time at Arsenal cannot be measured in passing or possession stats," Spanish journalist Guillem Balague tells *FourFourTwo*. "His stability as a personality was what Wenger needed at the time. One of his first games was 0-0 at half-time and no one spoke. Wenger moved to a corner to let Arteta talk for him – that was so Arteta."

Arsenal signed Arteta and Per Mertesacker – not to mention Park Chu-young and Andre Santos – in a deadline-day scramble that followed their infamous 8-2 humiliation at the hands of Manchester United three days earlier. Arteta was a replacement for the recently-departed Cesc Fabregas, at least stylistically, but more importantly he was a roll of gaffer tape for Wenger to stretch



over the leadership void in his squad, with its average age a little over 24. Arteta and Mertesacker felt like short-term panic buys at the time but both would go on to retire at Arsenal, having been pillars on which Wenger relied. The Basque would eventually take the captaincy in 2014; Mertesacker took it next.

"Mikel was a great character, nice to work with and passionate about football," former team-mate Lukas Podolski recalls, beaming, to *FFT*. "He was exactly the same as now: he gave 100 per cent. He hasn't changed."

Arteta treated his responsibility as skipper with the utmost sincerity, too. He was closer to a number of the coaching staff than his own team-mates, became a regular in the video analyst suite to discuss upcoming opponents, and fellow players would call him "gaffer" or "teacher's pet". Arteta would host barbecues in his own garden, and even here, his searing eye for detail remained. No fatty meat allowed – the get-togethers focused on combining team ethic with recovery.

Towards the end of his playing career, Arteta would study for his coaching badges, working with Arsenal's Hale End youth teams and the Welsh national set-up to attain his UEFA A Licence. His path was clear, even to those he trained with every day.

"Mikel had decided he wanted to become a manager, and he prepared everything for that," says Podolski, now 37 and playing for boyhood club Gornik Zabrze. "I saw, on and off the pitch, that one day he would become a manager. He had that vision."

In May 2014, Arsenal's in-house magazine asked Arteta about his coaching future.

"I'll have absolutely everyone 120 per cent committed, that's the first thing," he said. "If not, you don't play for me. When it's time to work, it's time to work, and when it's time to have fun then I'm the first one to do it, but that commitment is vital. Then I want the football to be expressive, entertaining. I cannot have a concept of football where everything is based on the opposition."

Once again, Pep Guardiola – managing Bayern Munich by then – was impressed. In November 2015, the former Barça boys crossed paths after Arsenal lost 5-1 to Bayern in the Champions League group stage, with Pep suggesting they should work together if he ever left Bavaria for an English side. Little did Arteta know that his pal was already in talks to replace Manchester City boss Manuel Pellegrini the following summer.

Arteta couldn't turn down Arsenal when they approached him in the dying embers of 2011's summer transfer window, but he simply had to five years later, when Wenger asked him to run the academy. For a second time, a Guardiola phone call had changed his life. Arteta was a regular sounding board for the Catalan while also completing his UEFA Pro Licence on the same Welsh FA course as Patrick Vieira, Freddie Ljungberg, Thierry Henry and Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool assistant, Pep Lijnders. Arteta and Lijnders got on famously, bridging the brewing City-Liverpool, Guardiola-Klopp rivalry.

"I loved every second," Lijnders tells *FFT*. "Mikel and I were in the same position at ▸



that time, him assisting Pep, me assisting Jurgen. Curiosity and respect – so many similarities. I'm happy for his route, his success, despite being competitors. I want people I respect to do well.

"Except against us," he adds with a laugh.

ALL HAIL KING MIKEL

Arsenal considered handing a 36-year-old Arteta, still a Manchester City assistant, the keys to the club in the summer of 2018 as Arsene Wenger's successor. It would have broken the Premier League Richter scale.

As audacious as that was, Arteta had his admirers. He was adored at City, with Leroy Sané and Raheem Sterling publicly praising him after they cruised to a 100-point Premier League title. He talked the talk, had studied Guardiolaball up close, and he *got* Arsenal. It would have been akin to a popular backbencher assuming power. Instead, Unai Emery got the nod as the 'safe' appointment.

Emery was a horse for a Europa League course at a time when the competition was the Gunners' best shot at silverware and entry back into the Champions League. He was a square-peg coach, however, and, after 18 increasingly toxic months, the club again went fishing for another Basque boss.

"If Arteta had started managerial life away from City, it may have been a different path, but Guardiola's influence cannot be denied," Spanish football expert Balague tells *FFT*.

"He picked up a lot of how you relate to players – how *not* to relate to players, even. He learned from Pep, then added his own thing, which was influenced by his own playing career but also where he comes from.

"He comes from Gipuzkoa, one of the smallest provinces in the Basque Country, of just 700,000 people, and from there you've got Arteta, Emery, [new Wolves boss] Julen Lopetegui, Xabi Alonso... it's an unbelievable quarry of football-thinking talent. Every year the coaching federation gives 500 licences – to race to the top, you have to be very good."

Arsenal took the leap in December 2019 and appointed Arteta after all. If they were brave, he was bold, laying out his famous "non-negotiables" in his first interview and stating that the club had lost its way. Granit Xhaka came off the naughty step – and the transfer list – after twice telling some jeering Arsenal fans to "f**k off" at home to Crystal Palace two months earlier. Mesut Özil was reinstated as the creative hub, while record buy Nicolas Pepe was dropped for academy talent Reiss Nelson in Arteta's first game, a 1-1 draw at Bournemouth on Boxing Day.

Clockwise from below One of the core lobes in Pep's massive football brain; look who's back; "This is called a Venn diagram"

Arsenal gradually improved, taking steps forward and back intermittently. Pablo Mari and Cedric Soares joined in January, while a teenage Bukayo Saka glittered on work experience at left-back. The skeleton of a team was beginning to knit together, as Arteta overloaded his side with fresh ideas.

"Mikel is about every small detail," Cedric tells *FFT*. "He always tries to prepare with a lot of detail. In every game, too. Picking games when he's not [detailed] is easier!"

In that first half-season, however, detail became the downfall. After COVID-19 forced the world into isolation from March 2020, the Gunners lost consecutive fixtures to Manchester City and Brighton away, comprehensively out-thought and out-fought in both games. Arteta realised that his ideals were too ambitious for this group of players. Rather than trying to ad-lib attacking moves, he switched to a back three and religiously rehearsed patterns of play. Lockdown in an empty Emirates Stadium was filled with the sound of Arteta barking instructions to his men, often in multiple languages, as he micromanaged their attacking patterns.

"He's on it," says Cedric, "but the rest is down to the players. If he's prepared every week with a game plan, we can't complain about not having enough information."



"MIKEL IS INCREDIBLY DETAILED IN EVERY GAME. PICKING GAMES WHEN HE'S NOT IS FAR EASIER!"

As the 2019-20 campaign finally drew to a close, Arsenal fans got their first glimpse of how good this coach could be when a red-and-white low block ground out wins against Liverpool in the league, then in the FA Cup against Manchester City and Chelsea – the latter in the final, on a silent, sunny August afternoon at Wembley. Game plans were executed exquisitely and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang was the scalpel of the side's military organisation. It was vindication.

"Knowing what had happened to Unai – and this was not much later – you realised there was something there," remembers Balague of that FA Cup victory. "There was a lot of work needed but there was also a lot of improvement. Knowing that other big decisions were going to be taken, you were hopeful that the success could continue."

Aubameyang was rewarded with a new contract and Willian joined from Chelsea on a free transfer, and then head of football Raul Sanllehi left north London before the 2020-21 season began. The 'head coach' sign on Arteta's office door was replaced by the word 'manager' and, with Edu as technical director, Arteta bought defender Gabriel Magalhaes from Lille and midfielder Thomas Partey from Atletico Madrid.

The club's post-Wenger structure had drifted towards a network of transfer experts, but now the manager was absolute monarch once more. Arteta had the final say and Arsenal essentially celebrated King Mikel's coronation with his Wembley triumph.

His honeymoon, however, didn't last long.





"YOU DESERVE BETTER"

Christmas came late in 2020. The Gunners were winless in seven league games and faced a Boxing Day encounter with Chelsea, Arteta's recurring supervillains: his first home opponents, his cup final foes, and even the reason for Guardiola first asking his advice.

Willian wasn't fit. In came the fledgling Emile Smith Rowe to address a dearth of creativity, with Saka on the right and the pugnacious Gabriel Martinelli on the left. It felt a little like the last roll of the dice; at least if Arteta were to fall on his sword, he'd do so sticking to his principles. At the very least, these young guns were prepared to give that 120 per cent commitment.

"When he first came to the club, I went on loan to Huddersfield," Smith Rowe tells *FFT*. "He brought me into the office and said, 'I want you to go and gain some experience for the first team – I want you to come back as a man'. He could see I was so shy."

Smith Rowe was not a Hollywood No.10. Happy to hide under a floppy, blonde fringe, he shuffled awkwardly in the camera's gaze – and that was exactly what Arsenal needed in their rut. The difference between him and Özil, frozen out and soon to have his contract terminated, was stark. The 'Croydon De Bruyne' drifted from side to side to create overloads and help his team-mates, rather than demand the spotlight.

A week earlier, Saka had tweeted: "You deserve more, Arsenal fans," after a dismal draw against Southampton. Now, he was helping to seal three hard-earned points with a cheeky edge-of-the-area lob over Edouard Mendy in a 3-1 win – and Saka maintains to this day that he meant it. A new attitude was born, as Arteta's Arsenal learned to play with expression and, most importantly, trust in the youngsters at their disposal.

"When I returned from my loan, I felt much more confident," continues Smith Rowe. "Mikel pulled me in again and said, 'You've come a long way'. He said that he was really happy with me. He's just really good with young players: he speaks to us a lot, guides us and helps us individually. That's what you want as a young player."

Arsenal eventually stuttered and spluttered across the finish line in eighth place, with the 2020-21 season chalked down as a learning curve for all involved. For some supporters, the following campaign would be the first in ▶

THE FAN VIEW

***Arseblog*'s Tim Stillman calls what he sees in Arteta's Arsenal (so far)**

I WAS FULLY BEHIND GIVING THE JOB TO A ROOKIE MANAGER
We've never really gone for the obvious manager choice: Chapman, Mee, Graham, Wenger. We've always had left-field appointments – that's where Arsenal fit. Arteta really wanted this job and he was attainable. He shouldn't be, by rights, but he feels like an Arsenal man.

ARTETA COULDN'T HAVE COMPLAINED IF HE HAD BEEN SACKED
I don't think we were always on this path. Arteta made mistakes along the way – Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang's renewed contract, Willian joining, and perhaps he could have managed Nicolas Pepe better – but there was no one on the market we could get who could obviously do any better. The phrase I always use is that he couldn't have complained if he had been sacked. That second half of the 2020-21 season, when Martin Odegaard came in and Emith Smith Rowe started playing, gave us a better idea of the football that Arteta was trying to play.

THE SUMMER OF 2021 CONVINCED ME THAT THERE MUST HAVE BEEN A PLAN
I was very interested in our so-called 'underwhelming' signings. Some Arsenal fans were genuinely upset about Aaron Ramsdale, quoting his long-ball statistics – the same with Ben White – and I was thinking, 'Surely that's the point, though?' It couldn't just have been an accident. I thought, 'All right, he's seen something in these players and I want to see what it is'. Our win against Burnley in September last year was the one: we played very differently, with Thomas Partey set up as the deepest midfielder. I was convinced quite quickly after that.

ARSENAL ARE IN A TITLE RACE
Arsenal are in a no-lose situation. It's easy to compartmentalise if we lose to Manchester City: it's not like last season, competing against Spurs. Every six or seven years, though, a window opens for a title win when everyone is in transition. There is another part of me that thinks if we don't do it this season, we won't have another opportunity for a long time...



living memory without European football, as a young squad learned on the job alongside their manager. However, Balague doesn't believe that the Arsenal board were ever close to pulling the plug on Arteta.

"You just have to go by what you hear," he explains. "Things take time and they were willing to wait. I didn't see any indication they were looking anywhere else; you know if a big club like Arsenal are going for a big manager like Lopetegui or Luis Enrique. Manchester United spoke to both, for instance. But there were no calls to vacant managers – nothing. They backed him, big time."

Arsenal doubled down on the manager's ideals, turning Martin Odegaard's loan spell permanent with an eye to making Real Madrid's playmaker the prototypical Arteta footballer: young, deft, clever on the ball and in space, and someone for team-mates to look up to. The Norwegian received the No.8 shirt and was told by his new manager, the shirt's former owner, to take care of it.

"Every day, I'm learning something new," Odegaard tells *FFT* of life under Arteta. "There are so many details – body position, how to control the ball – and it helps us to improve. He's not just telling everyone what to do; he's teaching us why. It helps the team to understand and to improve."

Odegaard became the nucleus in the centre of the pitch. Aaron Ramsdale, fresh from double-relegation at Bournemouth and Sheffield United, arrived in goal to much keyboard-warrior furore, with Poole pal Ben White a £50 million centre-back signing from Brighton. Little-known Albert Sambi Lokonga and Nuno Tavares joined the Londoners, too, as midfield and left-back cover respectively, and ambipedal Japanese international Takehiro Tomiyasu completed the overhaul.

Then came the club's worst start in Premier League history. Arteta's second full season in charge opened with an infamous string of back-to-back-to-back defeats: after Brentford bullied the Gunners on opening night, insipid losses to Chelsea and Manchester City rooted a shell-shocked young side to the foot of the table. Again, Arteta's position came under threat. Again, the board backed their man.

"The most interesting thing is that the board has given him time," Podolski tells *FFT*. "Everyone was saying, 'We have to change the manager. Why did they bring him in?' But he trusts in the process. Everyone works for one goal and now you can see what good scouting, transfers and decisions can do. When you trust in the process and everyone works together, then anything is possible."

Coaching buddy Lijnders agrees. "He is transforming the club," he says. "There isn't a bigger compliment in football."

A VISION APPEARS

Until Arsenal's recent home game against West Ham, Arsene Wenger hadn't been back

MIKEL'S GENERALS

We name five key players in Arteta's first three years in charge – some less obvious than others



GRANIT XHAKA

In his first week on the job, Arteta convinced Xhaka to stay; ever since, the Swiss midfielder has been loyal to his manager and fulfilled every kind of tactical tweak, dropping into the backline, moving to left-back and becoming box-to-box. Finally, he is receiving his plaudits.



ALEXANDRE LACAZETTE

The manager's friction with Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang was well-documented, but Laca quietly went about his job up front, working tirelessly, to become a leader. He might not have had Auba's spark, but his professionalism will be remembered fondly by Arteta.



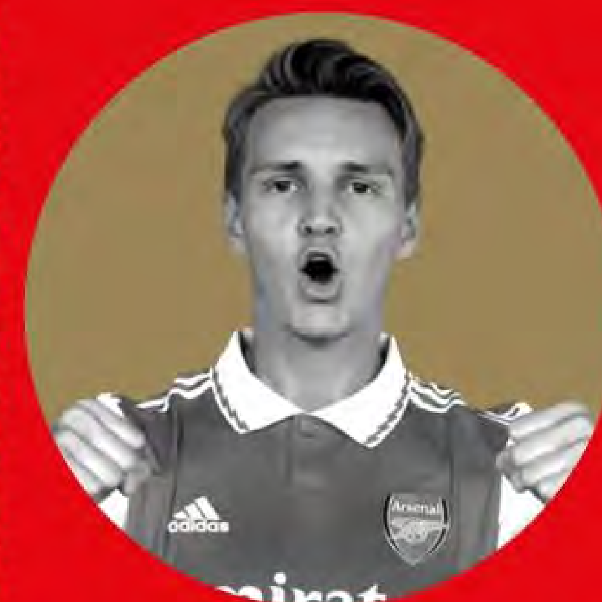
ROB HOLDING

The assembled hordes of Genghis Khan couldn't breach Arsenal's defence with sub Holding as a fifth defender. Another amiable leader, the Bolton Baresi is invaluable for shoring up 1-0 leads and setting the bar as Arteta's most selfless team player – all in brief 15-minute bursts.



BUKAYO SAKA

Saka began under Arteta as a makeshift left-back and went into the World Cup as one of the planet's best right-wingers. The starlet is virtually an ever-present, and his decision-making and maturity are the bedrock of everything Arteta wanted to build around in his attack.



MARTIN ODEGAARD

Just a year after signing for Arsenal permanently, the Norwegian could cite Arteta as his longest-serving boss. The wonderkid-turned-captain has settled down from years of development on loan, crystallising into a rounded midfielder and the heartbeat of this brave new Arsenal.









since his retirement, neither to the training ground nor the stadium. It was for the best, in many ways, that a ghost of such honeyed nostalgia refused to linger in Arsenal's marble halls, presiding over teenagers who will make mistakes as well as memories. Nonetheless, the current crop do high-five the Frenchman every day in training.

An eventful year on from the bleak autumn of 2020, when Arteta clung to the wheel like a ship captain lost in a storm, the Gunners boss asked for a Wenger mural to be installed at Colney: an image of his former mentor, raising one hand, for Arsenal players to tap on their way past. It felt fitting that as this new team began expressing themselves on the pitch, while the club culture was revolutionised from *laissez-faire* to labour-intensive, players should be reminded of the legends who preceded them.

Arteta's vision started to appear from the haze of that catastrophic opening. His team went eight league games unbeaten, playing bravely and expansively, as the manager looked for new ways to motivate a young team. For example, before a trip to Liverpool – albeit one that ended with a 4-0 defeat – Arteta notoriously pumped *You'll Never Walk Alone* onto the training pitch to simulate Anfield's unique atmosphere for his players.

"We were all a little bit confused when we could hear the music on... then we saw the speakers," Odegaard laughs now. "Anfield can be the loudest stadium in this country. It was a nice way to prepare the team.

"But Mikel is very creative. He will always do what it takes to prepare the team as well as possible. It's always interesting to be in

"ARSENAL TOLD ARTETA THAT, WHATEVER HE DECIDED, THEY WOULD BACK HIS BIG DECISIONS"

Clockwise from top "We're all winners here"; Ramsdale has shone for Arteta; "And this is how you work a string puppet"; beating Chelsea away in November: nice

a meeting with him: you can learn things, pick up new things, and there's so many details in the game he will teach you. It's nice to learn so much about football."

Arteta drafted in a coaching team, too, who would all take responsibility to talk to these burgeoning young men on a personal level as well as a footballing one. Mental health, self-confidence and settling in a foreign land were all topics brought to work. The gaffer dedicated his Manager of the Month award for September 2021 to the coaching staff by his side, in recognition of their efforts.

"As a young man, it's difficult to open up to someone you don't know that well," Smith Rowe says of Carlos Cuesta, Arteta's youngest coach at just 27. "But it was good to speak with him. He's someone I got along with straight away when I first met him.

"I don't know what it was that made me open up, but I thought, 'Let's see how it goes'. It's not only me he has helped; he's helped other players and it's good to have someone like that, knowing you can go to them. Not just him, either: you can go to the manager, the assistant – you can speak to anyone."

Fittingly for a young team, Arsenal found themselves flitting between brilliant and bumbling as the season wore on. There was no in-between: they drew just three Premier League games throughout 2021-22, the fewest in the division. This bunch would either tear opponents apart like laser-guided Red Arrows, displaying imagination, passion and fluidity of movement, or they would look like lost souls in a departure lounge, frozen by fear, waiting for an announcement to inform them of their gate. They could give you life, they could take it away – sometimes in the same half of football.

The older heads weren't exactly helping. For all of his selfless industry, Alexandre Lacazette would register two non-penalty goals all campaign, while in January 2022, Aubameyang's deal was terminated after one too many training no-shows. Arteta's "non-negotiables" had been compromised. Some questioned the harshness of this stance with his captain, while others were again furious, 12 months on from Özil's exit, with a supposed leader.

"He'd seen it before under Guardiola and in his playing career – you have to be brave," Balague tells *FFT*. "The club told him that whatever he decided, they would back him up, and big decisions were taken."

The bravery wasn't just in letting Auba leave, but in choosing not to strengthen up front, essentially leaving Arteta utterly unarmed against critics if his inexperienced team should fail to finish in the top four.

Narrative dictated that it had to be Spurs who pipped Arsenal to the final Champions League spot. A spectacular spring collapse, including four losses in five from mid-March, preceded a mini-revival for Arteta's men, but that was ended by back-to-back defeats at ▶

Newcastle and Tottenham in May. Pundits theorised that Arsenal would get few better chances. The youngsters begged to differ.

"Our mentality is our best quality," Gabriel Martinelli tells *FFT*. "We have a young team, but age is not everything, and our mentality is amazing. We go into every game with the same mentality to win."

The bruises healed quicker than expected.

"THIS IS OUR FAMILY"

Arteta often talks about suffering. He has certainly suffered for the career he has built. Serious knee injuries ruined his chance of playing for Spain when he was on the brink of a call-up – he almost defected to England – while the biggest regret of his playing days is that he was too cerebral to properly enjoy them. From the dugout, he'll tell players they must be prepared to suffer without the ball and embrace the hard slog as motivation.

Arsenal *have* suffered in recent years, not least without a top striker, especially when heading into Champions League races opposite one-time Gunners youth-teamer Harry Kane. Arteta waited patiently for the right man and in the summer Gabriel Jesus arrived, closing a circle from the manager's Manchester City days. Arteta's chosen No.9 was never going to have Kane's precision – few do – but he drives, he drifts, he dribbles and, ultimately, he runs. And that's enough.

His goal return is decent but unspectacular: five by the mid-season break, albeit from a total xG of 9.38, representing the Premier League's largest underperformance by any player and continuing a trend from his Etihad Stadium days. Yet fans love him, because he burns himself into the ground for the cause.

Below "I turned Haaland down, Gabi, I promise" **Bottom** Jesus is a leader for Arteta's Gunners





"Everyone can see the team's spirit," says the Brazilian, smiling when *FFT* posits that Arteta, a demanding whipcracker, would prefer his work rate over his ability. "You can see the way we love each other, the way we want to help each other on the pitch."

Indeed, fellow Brazilian Martinelli saw the introduction of a new striker as an aid to him rather than an obstacle. "I see myself more as a left-winger but I can play on the right as well, or as a striker," he insists to *FFT*. "I love to play with Jesus because he loves moving.

"He goes to the left, I can move central. It's very good to have that movement and it helps the team as well."

Jesus agrees. "This is our family and this is why it works so well," he says. "I spend more time here than at home. Absolutely everyone here is like this."

Jesus wasn't the only summer bargain that Arteta picked up from his former club. Left-back Oleksandr Zinchenko has been instrumental to Arsenal's evolution. The coach demands the Ukrainian and right-back White slide inside when the Gunners have the ball to form a midfield three either side of Partey, which in turn protects centre-backs Gabriel and William Saliba from counter-attacks. Providing a shape which keeps the opposition under constant pressure, this back five also supplements a fluid attacking five of Martinelli, Xhaka, Jesus, Odegaard and Saka. A rejuvenated Xhaka has licence to maraud as a de facto inside-forward from the left, and by November he had had equalled his best goalscoring season in an Arsenal shirt.

This feels more like a finished team than it ever has under Arteta, and not just the bones of something for the future. Top of the table 14 games into a season, five points clear of Manchester City having dropped just four from a possible 42, is a nice place to be – with or without a winter World Cup as distraction.

Six years on from Pep Guardiola asking Mikel Arteta to work with him – plus another four from that fateful phone call when the master realised the apprentice's tactical nous – are the pair embroiled in a title race?

"It's great to be where we are," Arteta smiled coyly before the break. "We have to reflect on what we are doing, and be very much prepared for what is going to come. I can say that it has been phenomenal to work with these players and staff."

It's been some journey. And there's no need to merely *trust* this process any more. Arteta's vision is there for all to see.

"EVERYONE CAN SEE THE TEAM'S SPIRIT AND HOW WE WANT TO HELP EACH OTHER"

RICE

Recent months have been memorable for England's rapping midfielder – after lifting a European trophy in his last game for West Ham, he joined Arsenal for a club record £105m in July. As he tells *FFT*, he's determined to guide the Gunners to glory

Words Chris Flanagan
Pictures Stuart Manley

RICE BABY



FROM THE FFT ARCHIVES:
OCTOBER 2023

"HOW OLD IS THAT TORTOISE?"

Declan Rice may be the most expensive British footballer of all time these days, but he's lost none of his curiosity about the age of domesticated reptiles. Arsenal's £105m club-record signing is back on familiar turf this afternoon, meeting *FourFourTwo* at our base for the day – a location in leafy Cobham, complete with a pet tortoise wandering around quietly in the background. It's 15, thanks for asking.

Coincidentally, we're just a few hundred yards from Chelsea's training ground, where the Kingston-born midfielder learned his trade between the ages of seven and 14. "I spent the first part of my career coming to this area, every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday," he explains to *FFT*. Today, our location has nothing to do with the Blues and everything to do with convenience – Rice is popping in to see us on his way home from his new training base at London Colney.

FFT have sat down with the 24-year-old twice before, in August 2019 and November 2021. Despite a significant increase in fame and status over the last four years, he's still the same down-to-earth personality as he ever was, happily chatting to everyone after arriving for his photoshoot, making small talk about the household pet and instantly cracking a smile for the camera when we're ready to get started. Soon, he's donning Arsenal's cult classic bruised banana away shirt from the early 1990s and chuckling self-deprecatingly, having almost toppled over when asked to lean forward for one particular photograph.

That friendliness and approachability is something he places great emphasis upon – on his first day at Arsenal in July, he made sure he was exactly the same, saying hello to as many people as he could, eager to make a good impression and waste no time in beginning to build relationships. He even made sure to quickly befriend the training ground dog: a chocolate labrador called Win, both named and introduced to the club by Gunners manager Mikel Arteta, in a bid to further boost the family atmosphere around the place.

"New signings are sometimes a bit quiet when they arrive at a club, and they take time to be integrated," says Rice. "But with me, I wanted to speak to everybody, to all the staff, the physios, the chefs. I've always been outspoken at the training ground – as a character I've just always been like that."

That willingness to put himself out there is part of the reason why he's long been regarded as a natural leader, and why he was chosen to succeed mentor Mark Noble as skipper during his spell at West Ham. In time, no one will be surprised if he becomes England captain – current armband-wearer Harry Kane is unlikely to be hanging up his boots for a while, but once a vacancy does open up, Rice appears the most obvious of obvious choices.

"I DIDN'T SLEEP WITH THE TROPHY!"

As the years have gone by, various people have remarked that there's almost a comic book hero quality about Rice. "It was a Roy of the Rovers goal," West Ham gaffer David Moyes declared in April, after the midfielder ran from his own half to net a stunning goal against Gent and help the Hammers to reach the Europa Conference League semi-finals.

Rice was to West Ham what Roy Race was to Melchester Rovers – inspirational in every way, the star of a storyline that will never be forgotten. He was the pivotal figure in West Ham's climb from the lower reaches of the Premier League to European group-stage qualification for the first time in their history, before darting from halfway to score against Dinamo Zagreb in their opening group game, bravely revelling in front of the home side's

Below Friendly but now with laser-like focus on winning, he means business





ultras for good measure. He was the man who stepped up when no one else could, to score the last-gasp leveller at Kidderminster and prevent FA Cup humiliation in February 2022. Two months later, he was also the man who struck a crucial goal at Lyon to send the Hammers to the Europa League semi-finals, leaving their fans partying on the streets of France. All that, from a defensive midfielder.

Then in Prague in June 2023, in what most people already suspected would be his 245th and final appearance for the east Londoners, he lifted a European trophy as captain – only the second skipper in West Ham history to do so, after the idolised Bobby Moore. It was a story that couldn't have concluded any more perfectly if Rice had scripted it himself.

"Definitely," he reflects now, still smiling at the memory. You sense he's been smiling ever since. "The whole six years at West Ham was perfect. We had some great seasons in the Premier League, nearly qualified for the Champions League and played in a Europa League semi-final. Then to reach the final of the Conference League and win it late on – it was the best thing that could have happened. The greatest moment of my career so far."

A year earlier, Rice had been distraught as the Hammers fell to Eintracht Frankfurt in the Europa League semis. The emotion spilled over via his criticism of Spanish referee Jesus Gil Manzano, such had been his desire to win a trophy for the club that gave him his break at the highest level, following his release by Chelsea. His manager Moyes had similarly let his frustration boil over that night, sent from the touchline after kicking a ball at a ballboy.

Together, the duo went back to the drawing board, and did everything in their power to ensure that when the Conference League came around, this time they went all the way. When Jarrod Bowen raced clear in the 90th minute of the final against Fiorentina, the moment had arrived. "It's up for grabs now," bellowed commentator Adam Summerton, borrowing the great Brian Moore's legendary line from Arsenal's last-gasp title triumph at Anfield in 1989. West Ham and the Gunners, united by an immortal sentence – and now by Declan Rice.

Above and right Rice's West Ham story was given a perfect ending



A European showpiece would have meant so much to him at any stage of his career – given that there was a significant chance it could be his swansong in West Ham colours, it was even more consequential. Two years earlier, Rice had experienced the other side of a major final, with England at the Euros. "That feeling of seeing all the Italian players running off, then lifting the trophy in front of us – it was horrible, one that I don't want to feel again," he told *FFT* in 2021.

"THAT NIGHT WAS SO EMOTIONAL – WHEN BOWEN RAN THROUGH AND SCORED, I FELT RELIEF TO BE HONEST"

Understandably, in Prague, the pressure he felt to win was enormous. "When Jarrod ran through and scored, I felt relief to be honest," he explains now. "When you go into a final, you never know what's going to happen. One team is going to walk away disappointed and one team is going to be buzzing. When Jarrod went one-on-one with the goalkeeper, to see him score and our fans erupt, it was unbelievable. That night was so emotional. To win, to hear the fans singing my name, then to lift the trophy, it was just so special."

Rice's family, his two brothers included, were in the crowd to witness it all. The West Ham skipper was soon joined on the pitch by his young nephew, both dancing together in front of the fans. "He got onto the pitch with me and was singing some songs," chuckles Rice. "So many people were asking me who he was and I was saying, 'He's my nephew!' Then all of my family ran on, which was very special. They've always been with me, mum and dad, and I've kept my brothers close as well, that support network. They've been key, supporting me through the tough times and the good times. You need that."

The next morning, Rice posed for pictures kissing the trophy in bed in his hotel room, although he laughs when we ask whether he ▸



Above The Rice fam get the party started in Prague

actually spent the night alongside it. "No, no, I didn't sleep with it!" he insists. "The cabinet was right outside my room, so in the morning I just dragged it in!"

The team returned to London and boarded an open-top bus from Upton Park to Stratford town hall, where Rice raised the trophy aloft once again at a civic reception attended by thousands of euphoric Hammers fans. "That day represented what West Ham's all about," he says now. "From the old Boleyn Ground to Stratford, it was just insane – I've never seen anything like it."

THE FINAL GOODBYE

That civic reception would be his final act as a West Ham player. That day, David Sullivan confirmed that a transfer seemed imminent. "We promised him he could go," revealed the Hammers chairman. "You can't ask for a man who has committed more to us this season. There are three or four clubs who have shown interest, and I expect the offers will start to come in today."

Despite rumoured interest from a host of sides including Bayern Munich, Manchester United and his old club Chelsea, eventually it was Arsenal and Manchester City who duked it out for his signature.

The Premier League champions went as far as having a £90m bid turned down, but it had already been widely reported that Rice's preference was to join the Gunners, who were ready to go further in their attempts to seal a deal. City withdrew, leaving the path clear for Arsenal to agree a £105m club-record transfer, surpassing the £72m fee they paid for Lille's Nicolas Pepe in 2019. It would also make Rice the most expensive British player ever, topping Jack Grealish's £100m move to City in 2021.

Before officially finalising the switch – on a five-year contract, with the option for an extra year – Rice had no shortage of people to say goodbye to. "I called David Moyes and we had a really nice conversation," says Rice. "I felt like we owed it to each other to speak – I have so much respect for him. I talked to Nobes [Mark Noble], too: it was a hard one for him because he's Mr West Ham, but he was buzzing for me. He was so happy that I could push myself and compete in the Champions League this year. He said, 'It's nothing more than you deserve'.

"Some of the players messaged me as well – I had plenty of replies in the group chat we shared together, I was taken aback. They're all such close friends of mine and I speak to them regularly. I texted the manager ahead of the first game this season, simply to say, 'Good luck for the season and see you soon'. He replied, which was nice.

"I want to keep a positive relationship with him because he was so good to me, and the supporters were, too – they're special. I know it's hard when you see a player move on to another club, but I'm sure they understand – hopefully when I see them again, I'll be able to say goodbye properly.

"It'll be pretty strange when I play against West Ham this season, because there are so many lads I know and get on with – they'll be saying stuff on the pitch, I'm sure! We've got them at the Emirates Stadium first [on Boxing Day], then at the London Stadium later in the season, and it'll be brilliant to go back there and see everyone."

As he speaks fondly about his former club, it's clear he means every single word. During 10 years at West Ham, six in the first team, memories were created that he'll cherish for the rest of his life. He may be wearing another shirt these days, but his love for the Hammers will never diminish.

"To be called a West Ham legend one day, maybe, would be a real honour," the then 20-year-old told *FFT* back in 2019, when we suggested to him that he had the potential to achieve precisely that. Then, Rice was modest enough to state it merely as an ambition rather than an expectation. Today, he remains modest enough to be reluctant to assume he accomplished his mission – even though only he, Moore and Billy Bonds have ever lifted any sort of major silverware at the club.

"I was the third ever captain to lift a trophy for West Ham, but I wouldn't say whether I'm a legend or not," he replies now. "I just tried to perform as well as I could across the nearly 250 appearances I made. I gave everything for the club, never missed training and played every game with my heart on my sleeve.

"Without West Ham, I don't know where I'd be. To become a footballer is really tough in itself, but when I got my opportunity, I took it and had the backing of the fans and all the managers and players I worked with – I feel like I kept rising each season. Every year there were more questions. Can he do it again? Can he get better? Can he keep being West Ham's star man? I loved taking that challenge on – I wanted to perform for the supporters and give them excitement every week.

"Being made captain of such a historic club was a proud moment, and the feeling I had after scoring my first ever goal for West Ham [against Arsenal in 2019] will never leave me, the way the stadium erupted that day. There

are so many highlights: the relationships I've formed, the connection with the fans and the staff. I couldn't have asked for anything more. West Ham made me the man I am."

SO GOOD THEY SIGNED HIM TWICE

From day one at Arsenal, Rice has brought the exact same commitment and dedication to his new club. He knows no other way. His bond with the Gunners fanbase was instant, and will only keep growing.

As his career progressed in recent seasons, with England as well as West Ham, it was clear that a big-money transfer was always a question of when rather than if. Finally the day arrived in July 2023, as he completed his switch to the Emirates – putting pen to paper not once but twice. Arsenal were presumably taking no chances.

"We signed at the training ground and we signed at the stadium," reveals Rice. "It was such an amazing feeling to sign for Arsenal, just because of how historic the club is, and a proud moment for myself, to get to where I've got to, making a big move. It's all been a whirlwind – I'm still only settling in now, to be honest. It's hard to describe how intense but good it's been. It's exactly how I wanted to push myself and exactly what I needed."

Given the interest from several heavyweight clubs, including Treble winners Manchester City, why was he was so keen to join Arsenal? "I looked at the squad, how young everyone was, how good they've been for the last two or three seasons, not only last year, and the trajectory they're currently on," he explains. "I saw myself fitting in, slotting in nicely, and the manager had a huge say in winning me over. It was the perfect fit, being a London boy and getting to play for Arsenal – I think it was the perfect move for me at this stage of my career."

The fact the Gunners and their manager were so enthusiastic did much to persuade him. Since leaving Highbury for the Emirates in 2006, Arsenal have hardly been known for pushing the boat out with transfer fees, but they viewed Rice as so important to Arteta's project that they made an exception – the first time they'd broken the British transfer record for a domestic player since recruiting Alan Ball in 1971. Sporting director Edu and chief executive officer Vinai Venkatesham jetted to Los Angeles to talk to Stan and Josh Kroenke, presenting a case as to why they should splash the cash on Rice. The owners listened, and gave the green light. ▶

"IT WAS HARD FOR NOBES AS HE'S MR WEST HAM. HE SAID, 'IT'S NOTHING MORE THAN YOU DESERVE'"



"When you're wanted as a footballer and a club really goes for you, that's special," says Rice. "And it's not like when they try to sign you, they do everything, then when you get to the club you're quickly forgotten. I still feel that love from everyone, the energy. It's how they support you, how nice all the staff are, how everyone talks to you, how the training is, just genuinely how the club is one family, because the boss has pushed the emphasis on that. I'm enjoying it."

Even during his initial weeks working with Arteta, he's been thoroughly impressed by what he's seen. "It's tactically, how he sets his teams up, the different ways he has of playing," he continues. "You have to learn it all and it's extremely difficult, because there are so many things going on in your brain – mentally, it's demanding.

"It's learning more about my position, how he demands so much from you and the team, how intense he is in a good way and how he pushes you. If you're a lone number six, when you're playing for Arsenal it's incredibly tough. You're the heartbeat of the team and need to be on the ball constantly, so it's where you position yourself on the pitch and also about helping others. Sometimes it's better to stay away from the ball to open up stuff for your team-mates... just loads of different tactics. Now matches are so mentally draining for me, as there's a lot going on inside my head on top of playing football.

"But I know there's so many more levels to reach and feel like Mikel is the best manager to take me there. I learned so much over my time under David Moyes and he improved me as a player. Now I can add a new dimension to my game – things I possibly hadn't worked on before, weaknesses I had, and Mikel can bring the best out of me. That's why I decided to join Arsenal."

Inevitably, while his status as an England regular had already put him in the spotlight, the £105m price tag will place even more media focus on him this term. By now, he's experienced enough to know there's nothing he can do to change that.

"It's crazy," says Rice, asked how he might have reacted as a child, had he been told he'd be worth £105m one day. "But to be honest, I've not even thought about it. The transfer obviously happened, £105m, I can't do much about that, it is what it is. If anything, I think it shows how well I played at West Ham over the last few years. I've established myself as a Premier League player in the past four or five years – I've not played for one season, then another comes and I've been bought for that. I know the Premier League inside out, I've got experience even though I'm young, and I want to pay that back. Hopefully I can."

Asked how he deals with the media focus that a player of his status will always receive, his answer is simple. "I just don't listen to it or read it," he says. "When I was a kid I used to get affected by it so much more, but now I take everything with a pinch of salt. Things will be news for a couple of hours, then the day after it's forgotten – it's part and parcel of football. If you play well you get praised, if you don't play well, especially with my price tag, you get criticised and people want to talk about you. But that's why we play football – people are asked to give their opinions and I can't stop that."







Left Arteta and Edu unveil their new No.41; Rice ruled the midfield in Arsenal's win at Crystal Palace

RECORD BREAKERS

In the Premier League era, Arsenal have now broken their own transfer record nine times...

Dennis Bergkamp
£7.5m

Thierry Henry
£11m

Sylvain Wiltord
£13m

Andrey Arshavin
£15m

Mesut Ozil
£42.5m

Alexandre Lacazette
£46.5m

Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang
£55.5m

Nicolas Pepe
£72m

DECLAN RICE
£105m

JAMIE REDKNAPP: RUNNING MAN

In 2018, without a heap of experience behind him, a 19-year-old Rice was notably more fragile. In his first interview with *FFT*, he looked back on the opening day of the 2018-19 campaign, when he was substituted at half-time against Liverpool with West Ham 2-0 down. He doubted himself so much on the return trip to London that he decided to ask manager Manuel Pellegrini if he could go on loan to a Championship club. Wisely, the Chilean boss said no, and Rice soon regained his confidence and flourished.

Half a decade on, he was making his debut for Arsenal on the opening day of the new season as an entirely more confident person. "Definitely," he tells *FFT* now. "I was only a kid in 2018 – you play in the Premier League, you make mistakes, and back then when you're just starting out, you think it's the end of the world. I'm still going to make mistakes now, but I'm more mature, I'm older and I realise it's not the end of the world if you do make a mistake. I have so much more confidence going onto a football pitch."

Even his hairstyle signifies that – gone is the aggressive-looking close shave of 2018, in its place the flowing locks of someone who seems totally comfortable in their own skin. Commercial deals have duly followed – travel around London and you'll see the midfielder's face on billboards and bus stops, promoting Muller Rice alongside the slogan 'Rice Rice Baby'. That phrase was born in 2021, when he made a surprise appearance during a karaoke night on Twitter Spaces, belting out his adapted version of Vanilla Ice's *Ice Ice Baby* as thousands listened in live. Since then, Rice has even gone on Sky panel show *A League Of Their Own* to rap it again, while Micah Richards and Jamie Redknapp added Running Man dance moves alongside him.

Confidence still flowing through his veins, Rice helped his new club to begin the current Premier League campaign with a 2-1 victory over Nottingham Forest – his first ever win in a competitive fixture at the Emirates. "Yeah, it probably would have been," smiles Rice, pondering a fact that had not occurred to him on the day itself. "I played there every season with West Ham, but we never won. What a stadium though, it was incredible – the place was absolutely rocking and I'm sure it's going to get even better."

Come the end of this season, it will be 20 years since the Gunners last won the Premier League trophy, thanks to the Invincibles of 2004. Rice was just five years old back then. "Wow, that's insane," he says, at a startling piece of information that will make plenty of people feel pretty old. Understandably, he can't pinpoint any memories he has from the time itself. "Not at five years old – I can't even remember what I did yesterday!" he

laughs. "I'm not sure if we'll see an invincible season again. That Arsenal team are legends and will be spoken about forever. With this young squad we have, we want to be seen in a similar light as well, and I believe we've got the team to push."

Arsenal came agonisingly close to glory in 2022-23, leading the standings for much of the campaign before faltering in the final weeks with draws against Liverpool, Southampton and Rice's West Ham, where the Gunners led 2-0 but were pegged back.

Arteta's outfit impressed many people last term, however, Rice included. "I thought they were brilliant," he says. "Other than the blip at the end, they were sensational to watch, and to play against them was really tough. They deserved to win the league – it wasn't meant to be, but this year that's the aim, to go one step further.

"When I played against Arsenal with West Ham, it was the energy, the spirit, the drive, everything. It was how Mikel pushes his team from the sideline – you could see how up for it he was. It makes you want to play for him and get the win. When you face them, they suffocate you, run hard, press hard and make it extremely hard for the opponent."

In other words, it's a style that suits Rice down to the ground. "Definitely – I like to be high energy, front foot, winning my duels and winning my tackles, as a number six or number eight," he enthuses. "I know Mikel loves that, too."

For many years after Patrick Vieira exited Highbury for Juventus in 2005, the Gunners never replaced what the Frenchman offered – a dominating midfielder who brought not just outrageous talent, but personality and grit, giving the team a foundation from which they enjoyed copious success. While Rice isn't exactly the same type of player, some have suggested that he can provide many of those qualities in the club's bid to become league champions once more.

"It's a big pressure and big challenge," he says of that comparison. "Vieira was the best in that position during that era – a monster, energy, legs, character, leadership... he had the lot. I'm still trying to add all of that to my game, even though I've got it in small doses. I'm trying to push myself to be at that level – hopefully I can emulate something of that sort for this club.

"I try to impose myself on a football pitch, to give my all, be high energy, be vocal to help my team-mates. They're little things you do ▸

"ARSENAL WAS THE PERFECT FIT, BEING A LONDON BOY – IT FELT RIGHT AT THIS POINT IN MY CAREER"



"I'D BE LIMITING MY ABILITY PLAYING AT THE BACK. I'VE GOT MORE TO GIVE IN THE MIDDLE AND GOING FORWARD"

Rice explains to *FFT* tactical guru **Adam Clery** why he relishes his central role

If you were a manager and had Declan Rice in your team, what would you say to get the best out of him on the pitch?
Express yourself, go out there and show everyone how good you are. A lot of coaches gave me similar advice when I was at West Ham – before games, Kevin Nolan was so good at that with me. He'd say some lovely words, then I'd head out and not think about anything other than playing well.

When you say express yourself, do you mean on the ball?
Yeah, because the Premier League is such high pressure, and it's not worrying about that. In the early stages of my career, when I was 17 or 18, I was going out trying not to fail or make any mistakes. You're thinking, 'Oh my god, I'm playing in the Premier League – if I make one little mistake, I'm going to be scrutinised'. Playing in midfield, you have to be on your game 24/7. You can't have dips because you're always on the ball, getting it off the backline, trying to progress the ball. If you don't do that, it stops the flow of the game for the team. Now, I go out feeling totally confident that I'm going to have a good game – I'm going to win my first tackle, first header and start on the right foot.

Do you like being on the ball?
I love it. You saw at West Ham last year how much responsbility I took, driving the team forward with the ball, scoring more goals, trying to make more assists and key passes. I enjoyed the more attacking role.

Which types of midfielders do you like to play with?
I'm enjoying playing with the ones at Arsenal now. Jorginho is so good at keeping the ball. He's so smart at passing and moving, keeping the ball ticking, and Thomas Partey is just as good. Martin Odegaard is so intelligent – you can pass to any of them and know they're going to be safe with it, you're going to get the ball back and they're going to drive you forward. If one goes, I'll stay – there's a good balance between us.

Are you better in a two or three-man midfield?
It doesn't make a difference. With England I play as a lone six with two eights; at West Ham I played in a double six with a 10; at Arsenal I've been on my own, or in a two, or higher up. I don't mind. I like to adapt and do what the gaffer asks.

There was talk you might become a centre-back one day. Could you?
I don't think I'm a centre-back at all. Sure, I could fill in there – I know the basics of the position because I played there for three years. I'd be comfortable with the way Mikel Arteta wants to make passes from the back. I could do all of that. But I'd be limiting my ability if I played at the back – I've got so much more to give in the middle, and so much more to give going forward. I think my best position is midfield.

Could you see yourself playing even further up the pitch, then?
I have been. In my first couple of Arsenal matches I was a number eight, higher up in the pocket, a bit to the left – kind of like the role that Granit Xhaka had last season. I did that quite a lot last year with West Ham, so I know I'm capable of it and love it – it frees you up more. You're constantly moving to get on the ball and give yourself time and space. When teams play Arsenal, they often sit back and the space isn't always there. It requires loads of patience and ball circulation, but I like playing eight and like playing six. I'm comfortable in both areas.



Watch Adam's tactical videos on YouTube – just search for 'FourFourTwo' or scan here

to try to help. We already have many leaders in the side who demand and push each other – to add one more can only be a good thing."

Vieira won a trophy in his very last game for the Gunners – the 2005 FA Cup Final against Manchester United – and Rice won a trophy in his very first, steering Arsenal to victory in the curtain-raising Community Shield. After his Conference League win for West Ham, it meant he'd bagged a winners' medal in two consecutive club games for different teams.

When Arsenal beat Forest 2-1 a week after the Community Shield, did Rice expect to see a presentation ceremony purely out of habit? "No!" he laughs. "But the Community Shield was a good trophy to win. We went 1-0 down but we stuck at it. Obviously we've got bigger ambitions this year – three domestic trophies and the Champions League. We 100 per cent want to be winning some trophies.

"That's why I'm at Arsenal, that's why the players have such high belief for the season, because we believe we can do it. City are such a tough team to beat, probably the best in the world right now, so they're going to take some stopping. But we believe we can do it."

"THEY WERE SENSATIONAL AND DESERVED THE TITLE – NOW THE AIM IS TO GO A STEP FURTHER"

If they could, would helping the club to end a 20-year drought make it even more special to be part of? "Yeah, 100 per cent," he says. "I think Arsenal fans have been demanding it for years, and rightly so because of how big the club is and how talented the squad is. It's been so long since that big trophy was there, so hopefully we can do it for them."

He's been relishing the prospect of playing in the Champions League, too. Aged 13, Rice was a Chelsea ballboy throughout the season when the Blues won the competition for the first time, sitting wide-eyed pitchside during famous victories over Napoli and Barcelona. As an Arsenal player, he intends to guide the

Bottom "One game, one trophy – bosh!" **Below, left to right** Will it ever stop? Yo, we don't know; his first ever win at the Emirates; is Dec the Gunners' new Pat?







Gunners to maiden European Cup glory. He already knows a thing or two about winning continental trophies, after all.

"Arsenal got so close in 2006," says Rice, referencing their defeat to Barcelona in that year's final. "To add that to the trophies the club has won would be top. In club football, the Champions League is the biggest thing you can play in – I've been looking forward to hearing that anthem for the first time. A club like Arsenal deserves to be in the Champions League, and I feel like anything could happen. Look at Inter last season – they went all the way to the final and no one expected that, so you can go on a great run. I believe we can compete with the best."

THE DOG DAYS ARE OVER

Away from the intense pressures of elite-level football, Rice has been developing another sporting prowess in recent times. "Golf is my thing now – I think I've become addicted, to be honest," he says. "This summer especially, I've tried to play as much as I can, whether it's nine holes or 18 holes. We've got a little golf group at Arsenal, so we try to get out as often as possible and play a round. We plan to keep it up and visit many different courses around the country."

At home, he has an adorable dog called Raffa, although the cockapoo doesn't always help him to relax. "Raffa is ledge, even if he's a bit annoying!" chuckles Rice. "He's a good dog. I think all cockapoos are like that – I talk to a lot of people who have them. They're just chaos and that's what he is, but he's sweet, bless him. It's hard to find time to walk him myself because I'm so busy, but he's found a best friend in my dad. They love each other. I think my dad loves him more than I do!"

Rice's international commitments further crowd his schedule, but he'll never complain about that, such is his pride to represent his country. All being well, he could reach a half century of caps for the Three Lions early next year ahead of Euro 2024. "I love playing for England," he says. "I'm near 50 caps now, so hopefully I can get that big milestone, which would be massive. There are some important games coming up and another tournament – I feel like everyone is really pushing in a good direction. Going into the Euros, we want to make that one step beyond."

After reaching the Euro 2020 Final, going one step further had been the target at the World Cup, too – Rice and his team-mates performed well in Qatar, until France caught them with a couple of sucker punches in the quarter-final and the dream was over once more. "We were so unlucky against France – I don't think we deserved to lose that game," recalls Rice now. "But the small moments in football matter, and France won the game in those small moments. There were questions about us ahead of the World Cup. Do England score enough goals? I think when we left the tournament, we'd scored the most goals of any side, with the attacking style we played. We have it in us, for sure. The squad is top, superstars everywhere. It's just about adding it all together and doing it on the pitch, going the extra mile and winning a competition."



Many fans hope the emergence of Jude Bellingham will help with that – Real Madrid's new boy is still only 20 and Rice is 24, so it seems likely that they'll play alongside each other for a long time. "Yeah, I hope so," says Rice. "Since I first played with Jude, in the last two and a half years he's gone up to another level. It's easy to play with him – I'll say, 'Go and attack, and I'll do what I do best', which is what the manager wants. It allows Jude to flourish, so we've got a good relationship and he's only going to get better. At Real, he looks so confident and assured."

Throughout this interview, Rice has projected exactly those same qualities. He's the same person as he was when we first met him in 2019, but his words are delivered with greater authority that maturity brings. He's aware he's moving towards the peak years of his career, and is determined to extract as much out of them as possible. The jovial, friendly side will never leave him, but the closing few minutes of our chat have made it abundantly clear he has laser-like focus: on winning, on achievement. Rice means business.

"If you'd told me that, at 24, I'd have made more than 250 Premier League appearances, won what I'd won and progressed how I'd progressed, I would have snapped your hand off," he says. "I've only been at Arsenal for two months, but I'm ready to keep pushing. I've got six years at Arsenal, and hopefully they're six very successful ones. In the next 12 months there's the Euros, the Premier League and the Champions League, and I'm hoping we can win trophies. That's the main thing for me. Hopefully in a year's time I'll be sat here with a few medals. That's my aim."



Above Conducting England to World Cup victory over Wales in Qatar

It's a fitting way to end our conversation. "A pleasure, top man, thank you," he says, shaking *FFT* by the hand, then courteously posing for photos with anyone who wants one – making sure to find time to speak to the teenage son of our snapper, who's come along to help out during the school holidays.

The past few months have propelled the midfielder to an even greater stardom than before, but there's still not the tiniest bit of ego about the £105m man. As the tortoise continues to wander around quietly in the background, Declan Rice waves goodbye and departs, in search of further glory over the year ahead.

THE INVIN



CIBLES



Arsenal started 2003-04 as underdogs – come May, they'd earned a different name...

Words Mark White

Image Stuart MacFarlane/Arsenal FC/Getty Images



"THE INDEPENDENT, THE SUNDAY TIMES AND THE GUARDIAN ALL PREDICTED ARSENAL TO FINISH THIRD IN THE 2003-04 SEASON"

Arsenal's dream of invincibility ended in October 2002. It was hardly the best team in the land that stopped them, either. It was a 16-year-old boy – Wayne Rooney – who deflated the champions 30 games in.

Just a month earlier, Arsene Wenger had boasted to a bemused gaggle of reporters how his team could feasibly go a whole campaign without losing a match. Well, if they were laughing then, they were howling now. It was as if by telling everyone what he'd wished for, Wenger had doomed it to failure. And so, Arsenal started again from the ground up.

This is where their manager was at his best. There was nothing that Wenger relished more than rolling up his sleeves and playing chief architect: he inherited a crumbling institution when he first arrived at Highbury in 1996 – complete with eroding back four – and completely reconstructed Arsenal in his own image. He'd already delivered a new training ground, designed with his specification in mind. A new stadium was next.

But first, he wanted to build something special on the field. This particular dream had no ceiling.

"It just shows you sometimes – and the media know it so well – that when you're too ambitious and you don't achieve your ambition, you feel stupid and humiliated," Wenger told *FourFourTwo* of the episode in 2020. "But you shouldn't be scared to put high ambitions into the brains of people."

His Arsenal side didn't agree. When the Gunners finished the 2002-03 campaign as Manchester United's bridesmaids – their fourth second-placed finish behind United in five seasons – Wenger called for a post-mortem. Many of his own team believed that their manager had put unnecessary pressure on them being unbeatable. It was exhausting to keep up such standards.

Wenger never saw it that way. Perhaps the last great idealist of the game, he believed such a grail to be the ultimate display of dominance for a team. This breathtaking brand of football wasn't anything particularly complicated, in his eyes: he'd simply built Arsenal on self-belief.

An unbeaten season. Just picture it. Could there be anything more beautiful for an idealist?

Maybe another time, Wenger figured. The unbeaten dream was locked in a drawer, for a rainy day. He didn't speak of becoming Invincibles again for a while. It was clear how much faith he had in his players though.

Arsenal tied both Patrick Vieira and Robert Pires to new deals ahead of the 2003-04 season. Veteran goalkeeper David Seaman didn't stick around and the only new face in the senior side was his replacement Jens Lehmann, as Arsenal spent just £1.5m on an assault to wrestle back the title from Old Trafford. It was a modest outlay – even before the blockbuster TV deals of today. But it was made to seem like spare change found down the back of Wenger's sofa. Challenges bigger than Wenger's legacy lay ahead.

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

"Roman Abramovich has parked his Russian tank in our front garden and is firing £50 notes at us," Arsenal vice-chairman, David Dein, remarked in August 2003. The choice of words was telling: this was urban warfare, as far as he saw it.

This was a brave new world; fantasy football in action. Tabloids were in heat, as 14 players signed in a tornado of transfers. Patrick Vieira was in Abramovich's crosshairs; an audacious bid for Henry was even made, only to be dismissed instantly. Goodness knows who else made the longlist.





Clockwise from top Henry celebrates his winner over Chelsea; Martin Keown confronts Ruud van Nistelrooy, post-penalty miss; Pires and Ljungberg enjoy victory in the North London derby; Vieira makes the difference to complete the double over Chelsea



"Obviously it helps if you have lots of top players," the Arsenal striker told *FFT* about Chelsea, during the Blues' pomp. "But having the best players doesn't mean you're going to have a winning team."

Manchester United, meanwhile, spent the David Beckham millions on Portuguese prodigy Cristiano Ronaldo – who Wenger had been tantalisingly close to luring to North London.

"Can you imagine what [Henry and Ronaldo] could have done together?" Wenger pondered when speaking to *FFT* in 2020. "That makes you sweat a little bit."

Arsenal fans were being made to sweat in a different way, however, over this West London windfall. The two-horse race that had defined Wenger's first chapter in English football was well and truly over: the music was about to stop and Arsenal didn't look close enough to a comfortable seat.

The Independent, *The Sunday Times* and *The Guardian* all predicted Arsenal to finish third in the 2003-04 season – *The Independent on Sunday* brazenly suggested fifth. When the season began with a Community Shield loss on penalties in the baking August heat, though, you couldn't blame them.

"I would have preferred to have had two more weeks, especially for the French players who were in the Confederations Cup," Wenger bemoaned at the season's start date. Sir Alex Ferguson was talking of the youth and energy of his new midfielders: Arsenal, seemingly, felt fatigued already.

Nevertheless, the Gunners won their opening four league games at a canter. Even without being at full tilt, Sylvain Wiltord, Freddie Ljungberg and Thierry Henry were too ferocious on the counter-attack for the likes of Everton, Middlesbrough, Aston Villa or Manchester City. Arsenal went top early on.

A first stumbling block came in the form of a home draw to newly promoted Portsmouth. Four days later, Inter Milan humbled them at Highbury, Julio Cruz and Andy van der Meyde both winding the North Londoners early before Obafemi Martins struck before half-time. The Nigerian peeling away to perform multiple backflips in celebration was hardly the ideal preparation for a trip to Old Trafford the following weekend.

"I had a lot of hatred for Arsenal," the otherwise serene Roy Keane once said about that weekend's match. "But I behaved myself that day and I regret it."

He was one of the few who did. The previous season, Sol Campbell had been sent off at Highbury for an elbow on Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, while the two sides' match-up in the FA Cup ended with Ferguson kicking a boot at David Beckham's eye. This time, the two teams danced around each other, only threatening to jab – before going hammer and tongs in the final round. ▶



THE TACTICAL TRAITS OF ARSENAL

From flying full-backs to marauding midfielders: what made this team tick

Arsene Wenger was never a master tactician – he was more of a motivator, a teacher-like figure at Highbury. But that didn't mean that Arsenal's 2003-04 side weren't tactically exciting.

Arsenal, like most teams of this era, lined up in a 4-4-2. From there, though, players would drift and fluidity was encouraged. Arsenal played with a high line, knowing their back four – most often Lauren, Kolo Toure, Sol Campbell and Ashley Cole – was athletic enough to cover the space behind. Wenger wanted his team to dominate the ball and look for openings in the final third.

In attack, Arsenal's players would take up the same kinds of positions. Full-backs Cole and Lauren would push forward; Gilberto Silva in midfield would sit, while Patrick Vieira would position himself slightly further forward. Arsenal created from the left; the left-midfielder – Robert Pires, usually – would link up with Cole, Vieira and Thierry Henry, who would often drift into that berth, while Dennis Bergkamp would drop deep to recycle possession.

This is perhaps what made the Invincibles so magnetic to watch. Their game was reliant on movement and passing, with no one tasked with staying in the box. They would lure opposition defenders out of position before hitting them with someone making the killer run in behind.

Images Getty Images, Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images (Henry), David Price/Arsenal FC/Getty Images (Pires/Ljungberg), Stuart MacFarlane/Arsenal FC/Getty Images (Wenger)





Clockwise from top left Pires' thunderbolt snatches three points at Anfield; Thierry Henry wheels away after scoring at the San Siro; José Antonio Reyes makes his Premier League debut; Henry delivers the three points for Arsenal at home to Manchester City

Patrick Vieira received a second yellow card ten minutes from time for kicking out at Ruud van Nistelrooy. A furious 22-man tussle ensued: goalless, up a man and sensing a third Arsenal implosion in just over a week, United smelt blood. When Martin Keown brought down Diego Forlán to a roar from the home support, it felt inevitable. Up stepped pantomime villain van Nistelrooy.

But Arsenal received reprieve: the Dutchman smashed the crossbar from 12 yards. When the whistle sounded, Keown clattered into van Nistelrooy, screaming in his face, as Lauren shoved the striker and Ashley Cole looked to join in. Staff on both benches had to separate the players from a full brawl, as van Nistelrooy himself hastily jogged down the tunnel and out of sight.

It was an ugly end to a match and one that saw record fines – but it lit a fire under Arsenal's season. Regardless of Chelsea's new-found wealth, this was the bunch that Arsene Wenger's side so desperately wanted to finish above this season.

THE ITALIAN JOB

Arsenal's mini-blip subsided with the red mist. As the North London nights grew longer in the autumn of 2003, Arsenal glittered under the Highbury lights.

The mid-tempo jog of Arsenal's early results ramped up a gear as challengers lined up to take them on. Wenger's men overcame Sir Bobby Robson's Newcastle 3-2 thanks to a late Henry penalty at the end of September, while a picturesque Pires rocket a week later helped the Gunners come from behind to silence Liverpool at Anfield. Two weeks after that, Roman Abramovich visited Highbury for the first time as Chelsea owner.

An increase in the Arsenal pulse had primarily been reserved for clashes with Manchester United over the past few years, with both Tottenham and Chelsea way down on the pecking order of importance for Gunners fans. The new-look Blues' trip to Arsenal in October 2003 felt every inch a derby though: an Edu free-kick and a Crespo curler to kick off the opening ten minutes; the end-to-end verve that only comes with an extra shot of adrenaline. If you didn't know it by now, you did by the scenes of Thierry Henry snatching the winner from a Carlo Cudicini mistake: Chelsea were to be reckoned with now.

When Tottenham Hotspur visited Highbury, they were keen to make a fist of it too. Ledley King started in midfield, pushing Arsenal back as Darren Anderton struck first. Minutes later, Henry forced Kasey Keller into a comfortable save but the Frenchman still looked incensed at Spurs' control, whipping the home crowd into a frenzy and asking for more noise.

Arsenal began to batter their rivals. Every tackle raised the decibel level. Henry, Bergkamp, Kanu, Pires and Ljungberg weaved through Spurs like Red Arrows, the latter two Gunners grabbing the goals to turn the North London derby around. Highbury was shaking by full-time. They were witnessing something new.

"The strength of Arsenal has been the pleasure to play together and try to enjoy ourselves," Vieira noted to *FFT* in 2008, after departing London. Arsene's Arsenal were always artists – but this particular autumn began to show a new ruthlessness. Thierry Henry dropped the Gallic grin in favour of a frown. Robert Pires and Freddie Ljungberg seemingly refined their games to become scalpels on either flank of Wenger's team. A switch had flicked. Arsenal weren't just toying with their prey anymore; they were killing it stone dead.

You could see it that night in the San Siro, when Henry raced Javier Zanetti from the halfway line for a loose ball. The Frenchman latched onto it, sped ahead, then checked back for the Argentine to catch up, only to race past Zanetti on the outside lane again and slot the ball into Inter's net on his weaker foot. That was just the third. Arsenal tore Inter Milan apart in their own back yard to win 5-1 and send them out of the Champions League, the memories of Martins' acrobatics banished, along with a European heavyweight.

"Funny that, isn't it?" Thierry Henry remarked to *FFT* in 2006, when asked about his extraordinary record against Italian sides. "I hear so often that it's easier to play against English defences..."





"WAYNE BRIDGE BROKE ARSENAL HEARTS WITH A LATE WINNER. SUDDENLY, ARSENE WENGER'S SIDE WERE RENDERED MORTAL"



THE CORONATION OF KING HENRY

Arsenal recorded nine league wins on the bounce in early 2004, each with an iconic postcard image from Henry. His knee slide in the torrential rain at Highbury after beating Manchester City 2-1; his nutmeg on Middlesbrough's Danny Mills by the corner flag, leaving the right-back flabbergasted; the cheeky disallowed goal against Blackburn Rovers for dispossessing Brad Friedel from a goal kick. He would rip through defences like smoke. He was majestic and merciless.

Arsenal stayed on top. They dominated Manchester United at Highbury and cut through Chelsea another couple of times home and away – the former in the FA Cup, thanks to a screamer from January acquisition José Antonio Reyes. Come April, though, they'd drawn their two closest chasers once more. Ferguson was yet again pitted against Wenger in the cup; three days later, Arsenal would have a Champions League quarter-final second leg against the Blues.

Henry started on the bench for the FA Cup semi-final, with Wenger looking to shuffle his pack ahead of a frenetic week. The Gunners squeezed, only for Paul Scholes to secure the only goal to end Arsenal's run of 18 straight FA Cup games without defeat. Three days later at Highbury, Arsenal raced out of the blocks against Chelsea with a bit more urgency. After a 1-1 draw in the first leg, the play pinged from one end to the other like Highbury was a giant pinball machine. Ultimately, Wayne Bridge broke Arsenal hearts with a late winner. Suddenly, Arsene Wenger's side were rendered mortal. Perhaps worse than that, Chelsea fans saw this as the changing of the guard.

"Whenever I see fans now they always talk about how from that moment things changed and that Chelsea were always a better team after that," Bridge recalled of his goal. Arsenal were just four points ahead of their London rivals at this point: momentum had swung towards Stamford Bridge, with Arsenal having to face Liverpool on the Friday of the week from hell. It would get much worse before it got better.

The Gunners went into half-time against Liverpool 2-1 down, with Michael Owen netting to put the Reds ahead at Highbury. Once again, it felt exhausting to keep up such standards. The memories of Owen's winner to sink Arsenal 2-1 in the 2001 FA Cup Final – the last game that the Gunners had lost in that particular competition, before the previous weekend – floated to the surface. As did the capitulation in the title hunt 12 months ago. It's half-times like these that you wonder what exactly your team is made of. When it feels like another unbeaten run could well be under threat. ▸

Images Stuart MacFarlane/Arsenal FC/Getty Images (Pires/Henry, Henry solo), Odd Andersen/AFP/Getty Images (Bergkamp/Reyes), Getty Images

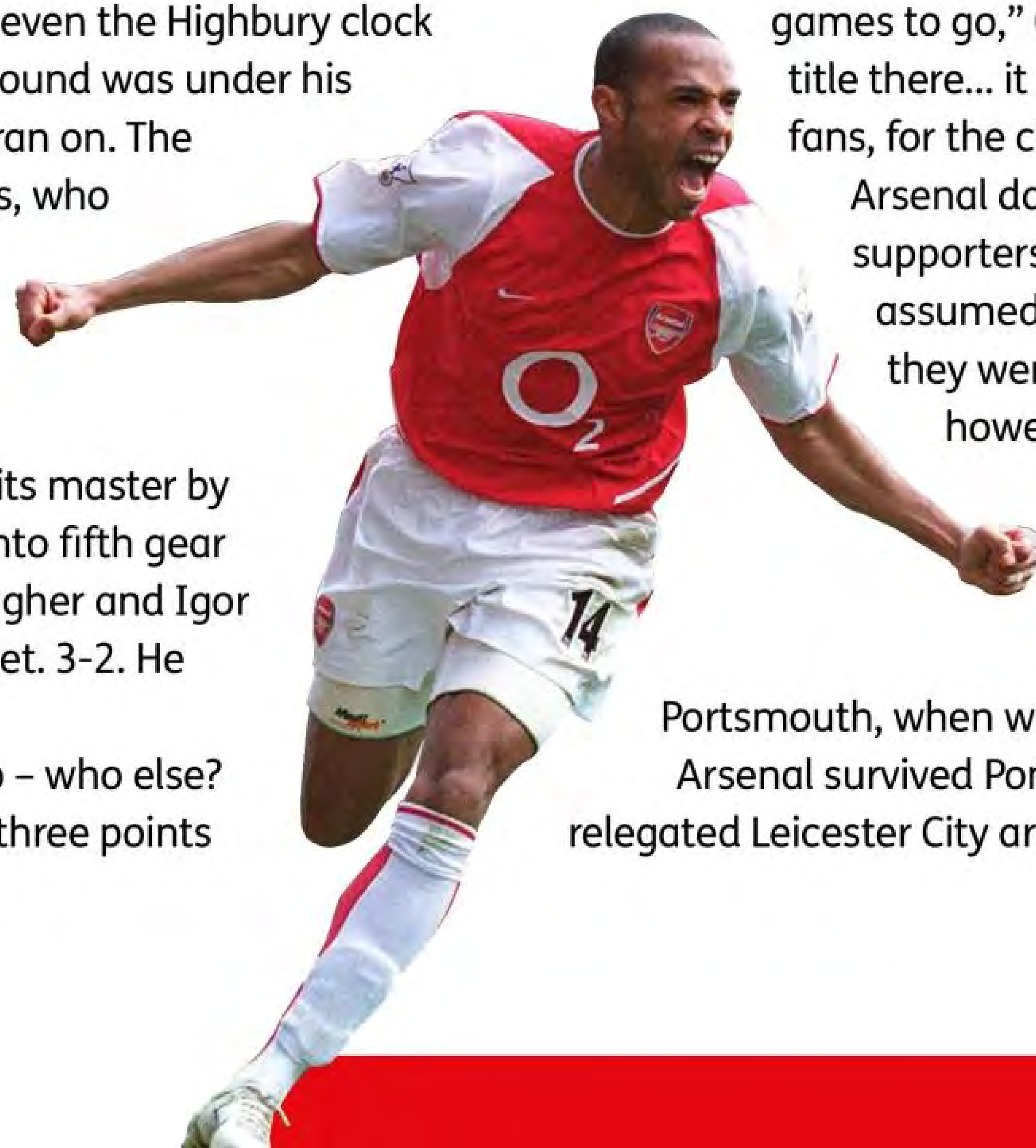


Clockwise from top Arsenal celebrate Henry's goal against Blackburn; Captain Vieira with the Premier League trophy; Thierry Henry celebrates the goal that put Arsenal 3-2 ahead of Liverpool; Arsene Wenger with the Arsenal fans at White Hart Lane

Thierry Henry wasn't having it. Three minutes after the break, he picked the ball up on the left-hand side and even the Highbury clock came to a halt. This 101-year-old football ground was under his influence, as he played the ball in-field and ran on. The number 14 tapped it to Ljungberg, onto Pires, who slotted home the equaliser. Highbury roared. Henry raced back to his half like a basketball player waiting to dance through his opposition once more.

Two minutes later, the ball was back with its master by the centre-circle. He took one look, slipped into fifth gear and charged past Didi Hamann, Jamie Carragher and Igor Biscan, leaning back to bury the ball in the net. 3-2. He didn't crack a smile.

It was Henry who snatched the fourth, too – who else? – to claim his hat-trick and a much-needed three points after a difficult week. He'd been unplayable that afternoon, dragging his teammates by the scruff of the neck to pull them over the line. Determination met imagination, and quite possibly that was the moment that cemented Henry in Premier League folklore. He'd always been fun and free-wheeling, but this was another side to him. This was Thierry Henry the one-man army.



WHO WON THE LEAGUE AT WHITE HART LANE?

It was 25 April 2004. After a short trip down the Seven Sisters Road, Wenger's men knew that just a point would win the league. Fate had twisted to bring this moment to Arsenal. Typically, Arsenal accelerated into paradise within three minutes. A Tottenham corner turned into a stunning counter-attack, capped off by captain Vieira stretching his long limbs to turn in Dennis Bergkamp's cross. Robert Pires – who seemingly always scored against Spurs – doubled the cushion on 35 minutes. Like so often in this breathless campaign, Arsenal were in cruise control: Jamie Redknapp and Robbie Keane would drag Arsenal back but it didn't seem to matter. That day was only ever going down as a loss for the home team.

"It was something very special because we had four games to go," Gilberto Silva later recalled. "But to win the title there... it means a lot for all the players, for the fans, for the club."

Arsenal danced long after the final whistle with the supporters in the ground: fans who perhaps assumed that by outrunning all other competitors, they were simply unbeatable. The players, however, still weren't thinking about that.

"We never thought about [the unbeaten run]," Thierry Henry told *FFT* in 2006. "The only time we really said anything among ourselves was at Portsmouth, when we went behind before drawing 1-1."

Arsenal survived Pompey, Birmingham and Fulham, before relegated Leicester City arrived at Highbury as the last contender of



PIZZAGATE: HOW THE RECORD ENDED

Nothing lasts forever – the Invincibles were eventually beaten on game no. 49

Wayne Rooney had ended Arsenal's 30-match unbeaten run as a 16 year old for Everton in 2002. Now, the spotlight was back on the teenager again – now at Manchester United – for the 50th game in Arsenal's current unbeaten run.

Predictably, the Old Trafford clash was a tempestuous affair. Rio Ferdinand clattered into Freddie Ljungberg early on with the Swede through on goal, with no foul given; Gary Neville scythed down José Antonio Reyes at every opportunity, while Ruud van Nistelrooy appeared to scrape his boot high on Ashley Cole's leg.

Arsenal were riled. The rush of blood seemed to impair them, however, with United keeping the ball calmly. With less than 20 minutes to go, Sol Campbell brought down Rooney in the penalty area.

Van Nistelrooy stepped up, at the opposite end to the one he'd missed the spot-kick from last season. This time he made no mistake, sending Jens Lehmann the wrong way. In the dying embers of the game, Rooney popped up again to compound the misery with a second.

The aftermath was again nasty. Tempers flared, frowns furrowed and famously pizza was thrown at Sir Alex Ferguson in the tunnel by Arsenal players, incensed at what they felt was injustice over the referee's performance. The Invincibles were no longer unbeatable. They were never to reach such hallowed heights again.

"HENRY RESTORED ORDER WITH A PENALTY, BEFORE THE SKIPPER TOOK THE SPOILS, JUST AS IN 1998"



19 to attempt a heist on the history books. And they would have too, had they held onto their 26th-minute lead, until the inevitable crash, bang and wallop.

Naturally, Henry restored order with a penalty, before the skipper took the spoils, just as in 1998. Then, it was Tony Adams, racing from the back to hammer home a volley and sign off the title; this time, Vieira started the move – he's perfectly in shot for the moment he makes the run, as if he knows he's the main character – only for Bergkamp to slide the ball in, Vieira to sidestep the keeper and finish the 73rd and final goal of the season.

73, and most of them special. 90 points. 26 wins, 12 draws. Around 3,500 minutes undefeated. The headline statistic: zero losses.

At full-time, Henry and Campbell basked in the London sun in the centre-circle. Gilberto Silva draped his native Brazilian flag over his shoulders; Edu sprayed a full water bottle over his teammates in the absence of champagne, as the squad united in a circle, bouncing and can-canning together. Arsene Wenger's then-seven-year-old daughter, Lea, wore her dad's medal and lapped the pitch.

The architect of all this stood close to his dugout, deep in thought. Just 18 months ago he'd revealed that this was his ambition, stating that invincibility was merely the only way to prove that no one would ever win the title better than you did it. Perhaps he was crunching those extraordinary numbers for himself.

In the years to come, others would score more goals, concede less, rack up more points. They'd win more games too. The Invincibles, the Arsenal side of 2003-04, were never really about the numbers, though. Truly, to judge them by the statistics – even that hollow '0' under the 'L' column – is to read a novel by the page numbers.

In the end, no one remembers the stats of that season – bar the big one. They just remember the moments. The exhilaration of a counter-attack; the excitement of a solo strike. How this team sparked into a flame every week to put on a show. Wenger once said that football was art. He believed that this team could become great – all they had to do was believe.

Football needs idealists. It should never reflect the humdrum and buzz of the weekday office. It's better than that. It's about hopes and dreams and beauty and ambitions so grand that the average armchair pundit laughs in your face for saying them out loud.

Well, this was the story of a man who had a dream and told the world, was laughed at and achieved it anyway. And is there anything more beautiful than that in football? The architect of the Invincibles, it's safe to say, had the final chuckle, that sunny afternoon in May 2004.

Images Getty Images, Stuart MacFarlane/Arsenal FC/Getty Images (Wenger, Vieira trophy), David Price/Arsenal FC/Getty Images (Henry solo)

THE STORY OF ARSENAL



WOMEN

Arsenal Women are the most successful women's football team in Britain. Take a tour through their illustrious history

Words Tim Stillman



Image Charlotte Wilson/Offside/Getty Images





Founded in 1987, Arsenal Women have established themselves as England's foremost women's football team. With 15 league titles (a record), 14 FA Cups (a record), 16 League Cups in its various guises (a record) and a European Cup (the only British team to have won the tournament to date), Arsenal have set the standard for the women's game in the UK and Europe. With legends of the game such as Kelly Smith, Kim Little, Jayne Ludlow, Marieanne Spacey, Alex Scott, Rachel Yankey, Faye White and Vivianne Miedema enjoying storied careers with the club (to mention just a selection), it's quicker to list the titans of the English game who haven't pulled on the red and white shirt at some stage of their careers.

Propelled forward by visionary founder and coach Vic Akers, Arsenal dominated the women's game throughout the 1990s right up until the early years of the WSL in the 2010s. Though their stranglehold has eased somewhat by the arrival of clubs like Manchester City and Chelsea, they remain a force at home and abroad and compete at the top table of the women's game. And, did we mention that they are the only British team to have won the European Cup? Meet Arsenal Women.

THE FORMATION OF ARSENAL LADIES

Arsenal Ladies would go on to become England's pre-eminent women's football team in the early to mid-1990s. Their origins, however, were somewhat humbler. After a career in the lower leagues of men's football as an uncompromising left-back, Vic Akers took up a role within Arsenal in the Community, a department which had been set up by the club in 1984. At around the same time, Alan Sefton – who would later go on to head up Arsenal in the Community – joined the AITC team.

One of the employees at AITC was a women's footballer who played for Aylesbury Town. Initially, Arsenal were signposting women from the community that wanted to play football to Aylesbury but with the team about to break up, Arsenal in the Community decided to take them over and rebrand them as Arsenal. The Arsenal Ladies team was started, rather informally, by Vic Akers and Alan Sefton in 1987 without pomp or ceremony. It was a community-based initiative for women in the North London and Hertfordshire area that wanted to play football.

Akers coached the team on a voluntary basis. Akers came out of the AITC setup in the late 1980s to become the first-team kit man under George Graham, but he insisted on maintaining his role as coach of the Arsenal Ladies alongside his new duties. The Ladies team ran free of charge without so much as expenses being paid for anyone involved for many years, until Arsenal's vice-chairman David Dein became more involved and the club began to invest money into the setup, attracting the best talent in Britain as they did so.

Yet in those embryonic years, the Ladies team operated a little like an ex-pros and celebrities team, which Arsenal in the Community also devised in the late 1980s. The operation started small; it would have been impossible for Akers to conceive how the Arsenal Ladies brand would grow into what it is today. Since there were no salaries and costs involved, no sign-off was required by the club's top brass.

"IT WOULD HAVE BEEN IMPOSSIBLE FOR AKERS TO CONCEIVE HOW THE ARSENAL LADIES BRAND WOULD GROW INTO WHAT IT IS TODAY"

YEARS OF DOMINANCE

For the first few years of their existence, Arsenal Ladies were limited to the odd appearance in one-off cup competitions and friendly games. However, as the '80s gave way to the '90s, the team became more organised. It was the 1991-92 season when they really made their breakthrough, winning their first major trophy, the Women's League Cup. During that season, they also won promotion to the FA Women's Premier League – the top-flight – from the FA Women's National League South.

In 1992-93, Arsenal won the FA Women's Premier League at the first time of asking. In fact, they won the domestic treble, beating Knowsley (who later became Liverpool) 3-0 in the Women's National League Cup at Wembley, the only women's club football game ever played at the old Wembley. Doncaster Belles were the dominant team in women's football at that time and a 2-1 victory over the Belles at ▶

Clockwise from top left Vic Akers gives a team debrief circa 1991; Arsenal Ladies (front bus) and the men's team (behind) celebrate their Doubles in 1998; Today, top female players like the US's Megan Rapinoe are global names; Arsenal Ladies' domination begins in 1993



THE WOMEN'S GAME

Women's football in England dates back to roughly the 1890s and the FA records the first women's football match as 'North v South' in 1895. However, it was in the aftermath of World War I that the game exploded in popularity with factory teams like Dick, Kerr Ladies drawing attendances in the tens of thousands as women had more freedom to play the sport while supporting the war munitions effort during the war years.

On Boxing Day, 1920, Dick, Kerr Ladies drew a crowd of 53,000. Worried by the rising popularity of the women's game with the war over, the FA banned women's football in 1921, outlining that it was "quite unsuitable for females." The ban remained in place until 1971. The game grew slowly, with the FA taking control of women's football in 1993 but it remained semi-professional at the top level until recently.

The establishment of the WSL and TV deals with BT Sport and BBC increased the game's profile, while international tournaments have become a regular feature on terrestrial television. Now every WSL and Championship game is broadcast and players in the top-flight can make a living and attract good sponsorship deals. Top men's clubs like Barcelona, Manchester City, Chelsea, PSG and Bayern have all begun to invest more heavily in their women's teams across Europe, while women's soccer remains very widely watched and participated in in the USA, who have won four World Cups and four Olympic gold medals.

Images Bob Thomas Sports Photography via Getty Images (1991), Eileen Langsley/Popperfoto via Getty Images (1993), Steve Eason/Hulton Archive/Getty Images (1998), Ira L. Black/Corbis via Getty Images (Rapinoe)

Highbury in March 1993, watched by a crowd of over 18,000 as part of a fundraiser event for badly injured boxer and Arsenal fan Michael Watson, set Arsenal Ladies on their way to the title.

It was Donny Belles' second league defeat in 15 years and heralded Arsenal as the new force in women's football. With players like Naz Ball, Debbie Bampton, Sian Williams and Kirsty Pealling, the Gunners boasted the finest talent in the country. Even when signing players from far less storied clubs, Akers would always don the club suit and blazer to meet with potential recruits and take them to the executive boxes at Highbury to sign their contracts. His links with the men's team as the kit manager meant he was well connected to that side of the club.

He also had the ear of vice-chairman David Dein. The game was still amateur at this point, so Arsenal would often woo the best players by finding them jobs elsewhere in the club setup, either in an administrative capacity or in the laundry department, for example. The acquisition of Marieanne Spacey from Friends of Fulham in 1993 was a game-changer in terms of Arsenal Ladies' domestic dominance.

Spacey was the best player in the country and with her pulling the strings in the forward line, Arsenal won further league titles in 1995 and 1997, as well as Women's FA Cups in 1995, 1998 and 1999. In the 1995-96 season, Arsenal slipped off the pace and finished 3rd in the league – that was the season that Spacey missed a chunk due to maternity leave. A young forward called Kelly Smith also emerged in the 1990s and aged just 18, she scored two outstanding goals at Highbury against Liverpool to win the league title in 1997.

THE RISE OF FULHAM AND WINNING THE QUADRUPLE

While Arsenal had the majority of the 1990s their own way, winning three league titles, four FA Cups and four League Cups between 1992 and 1999, new challenges would emerge at the beginning of the millennium. Teenage prodigy Kelly Smith left to play in the American college system and then as a full-time professional in America in 1999. Arsenal still had the best team in the country. That is, until Fulham Ladies announced their decision to turn fully professional in 2000.

Supplementary jobs in the office or the club laundry could no longer compete with what Fulham were offering, a first in English women's football. The Cottagers were able to attract the flagship talent from across the UK and they even signed up some of Arsenal's most prominent talent – Rachel Yankey and Marieanne Spacey made the move across London. Fulham did manage to win the league in 2002-03 as well as a couple of FA Cups in 2002 and 2003 (though they lost the 2001 FA Cup Final to Arsenal who, for once, were underdogs for the occasion) but funding for the project stalled and







Clockwise from top Emma Byrne saves an FA Cup Final penalty in 2001; Shelley Kerr was at Arsenal for just 17 months; Karen Carney and Kelly Smith with the 2007 UEFA Cup **Below** Akers with Smith



Arsenal reassumed pole position, winning nine consecutive league titles from 2004 until 2012.

Between 2004 and 2009, Arsenal went 108 league games unbeaten, a run that encompassed 51 consecutive wins. But it was the 2006-07 season that truly cemented their legend. The Gunners won the quadruple during that season, going unbeaten in each competition they played in, including the Women's UEFA Cup (now known as the Women's Champions League), becoming the first and, to date, only British side to win Europe's premier competition.

In a nervy two-legged final against Swedish giants and significant favourites for the final Umea, who boasted a young Marta in their line-up, Arsenal scrapped out a 1-0 aggregate win thanks to a late Alex Scott winner in the first leg in Sweden.

Taliswoman Kelly Smith, who returned to the club in 2005, missed both legs of the final through suspension after earning a red card in the semi-final for swearing at the Brondby fans before kicking the door off the referee's dressing room on her way off the pitch.

A pleading letter from David Dein to UEFA did nothing to dissuade the powers that be from suspending one of world football's most celebrated talents from the showpiece final. Akers' side, featuring Karen Carney, Faye White, Anita Asante, Rachel Yankey, Emma Byrne and Lianne Sanderson, battled tooth and nail for a 0-0 draw in the second leg at Boreham Wood under relentless pressure from the Swedish side to claim their most significant triumph to date and a triumph that remains unmatched by a British side.

THE FORMATION OF THE WSL

Even after the departure of Vic Akers as coach in 2009, Arsenal continued their dominance into the 2010s. In 2011, the face of women's football was changed with the formation of the Women's Super League (WSL), initially comprising eight clubs with

Images Mike Hewitt/Allsport/Getty Images (Byrne), David Price/Arsenal FC via Getty Images (Carney/Smith), AMA/Corbis via Getty Images (Kerr), Ross Kinnaird/Getty Images (Akers/Smith)

"ARSENAL SWEPT TO A DOMESTIC TREBLE IN THE INAUGURAL SEASON OF THE WSL"

radical plans for expansion, a complementary television deal with BT Sport and BBC and a promise to raise the profile – and the funding – for elite women's football in the UK. The league would also be contested during the summer months to give the matches more airtime away from the glare of the Premier League.

Arsenal, of course, swept to a domestic treble in the inaugural season of the WSL, comfortably winning the league, the FA Cup and the newly branded League Cup competition, the Continental Tyres Cup. Arsenal were handed another boost with the collapse of the Women's Professional Soccer League in the US. Kelly Smith, who again left for the US in 2009 after another five-year spell at the club, Alex Scott and Gemma Davison all returned to Arsenal after the sudden dissolution of the WPSL.

With players like Steph Houghton, Ellen White, Jordan Nobbs and Kim Little emerging and Faye White, Jayne Ludlow and Emma Byrne still going strong, Arsenal strolled to the league title again in 2012, also retaining the Conti Cup. A shock FA Cup semi-final defeat against Chelsea prevented them from retaining the treble. At the end of the 2012 season, however, their course would change when highly renowned coach Laura Harvey decided to leave the club to pursue new challenges in the United States. Arsenal were set for a spell of transition as stiffer competition emerged during a time of upheaval at the club.

THE TRANSITION YEARS AS THE COMPETITION EMERGES

In February 2013 Arsenal appointed 44-year-old Scottish coach Shelley Kerr to the manager's position. The club underwent a large turnover of players. The WSL introduced a wage cap, meaning only three players per squad were allowed to earn more than the £20,000 per annum cap. It led to a better distribution of talent across the league and Steph Houghton, Ellen White and Gilly Flaherty moved on, while legends Faye White, Ciara Grant and Jayne Ludlow retired. Kim Little moved to Seattle Reign at the end of 2013.

Arsenal finished third in the WSL and missed out on Champions League ▶





Above Ellen White with the WSL trophy in 2011
Left Ian Wright with Alex Scott, Yvonne Tracey and Leanne Champ, who had part-time jobs in Arsenal's laundry
Below Arsenal celebrate their 2015 WSL Continental Cup win



Images David Price/Arsenal FC via Getty Images (White), Stuart MacFarlane/Arsenal FC via Getty Images (laundry), Daniel Smith/Getty Images (2015)



"LOSA LEFT THE CLUB WITH A SIGNIFICANT GIFT – A YOUNG DUTCH STRIKER CALLED VIVIANNE MIEDEMA"

qualification due to an admin error in the 2013 season. They failed to re-register midfielder Katie Chapman properly on her return from maternity leave and were docked three points by the FA, costing them second place. They won the FA Cup in 2013 but the 2014 season began disastrously and Shelley Kerr stepped down in June 2014 with the club bottom of the WSL, though she did manage to win another FA Cup as a Kelly Smith-inspired Gunners side defeated Everton 2-0 in the final at Stadium MK.

Spaniard Pedro Martinez Losa was appointed in the summer of 2014 and he oversaw a project of professionalisation at Arsenal, which saw the number of full-time backroom staff grow exponentially. With Chelsea, Liverpool and Manchester City rapidly professionalising, the Gunners were in danger of falling behind. They flexed their muscle in the market too, acquiring big-ticket players like Casey Stoney, Fara Williams, Vicky Losada, Asisat Oshoala and Danielle van de Donk.

However, Arsenal still struggled to mount a serious title challenge, despite doing well in the domestic cups. A spectacular effort from Danielle Carter won Arsenal the FA Cup at Wembley against Chelsea in May 2016 to add to the 2015 Conti Cup. The squad was stacked with talented individuals but Losa struggled to mould them into a coherent enough team to challenge for the title. After a stuttering start to the 2017-18 season, he resigned. As well as professionalising Arsenal behind the scenes, Losa did leave the club with a significant gift. In the summer of 2017, he signed a young Dutch striker called Vivianne Miedema.

RETURN TO GLORY

Arsenal looked outside of Europe for Losa's successor and appointed Australian coach Joe Montemurro from Melbourne City in November 2017. Montemurro oversaw an immediate uptick in results as he implemented a stable, possession-based brand of football. Arsenal won the Conti Cup in March 2018, beating Manchester City in the final thanks to a goal from Vivianne

TOP GUNS

The greatest players to pull on the famous red and white for Arsenal Women



KELLY SMITH

Hertfordshire-born Smith represented her childhood club across three spells, in between sojourns to the US to be a full-time professional. A number 10 and number 9 rolled into one, Smith is revered as the finest female footballer England has ever produced. She is also England's second-highest goalscorer of all time after losing top spot to Ellen White in November 2021.



VIVIANNE MIEDEMA

Miedema is the WSL's all-time leading goalscorer, holds the record for most goals in a single WSL season, and also broke the Netherlands goalscoring record before her 23rd birthday. She is currently one of the best players in the world.



MARIEANNE SPACEY

A withdrawn striker with a fearsome shot, Spacey was the precursor to Kelly Smith and taliswoman for club and country throughout the 1990s. Her eight years at Arsenal yielded five league titles, five FA Cups and six League Cups.





Miedema – though they went on to lose the FA Cup Final to Chelsea that May.

It was in Montemurro's first full season in 2018-19 that Arsenal would fully announce their return to the summit of women's football in England. Supercharged by the goals of Miedema (at time of writing, the WSL's record goalscorer, she reached 100 Arsenal goals, none of which were penalties, in just 110 appearances and she broke the Netherlands goalscoring record before her 23rd birthday), the midfield stylings of captain Kim Little (who rejoined the club in 2017) and Jordan Nobbs and the defensive knowhow of Leah Williamson, Arsenal swept to their first WSL title in seven years in 2019.

Arsenal were unable to defend their title in 2019-20 and when the season was cancelled owing to the coronavirus pandemic, they were awarded third place on points per game. In the final game before the season cancellation, they lost the 2020 Conti Cup Final to Chelsea in stoppage time despite dominating the match. After the game, a testy Joe Montemurro insisted he would not compromise his possession-based philosophy despite a poor record against a more transitional Chelsea outfit.

Games against Chelsea and Manchester City became a big issue for the team during 2019-20 and 2020-21, especially away from home. The bigger teams were figuring out how to repel Arsenal and they were subsequently knocked out of the 2019-20 Champions League at the quarter-final stage by Paris Saint-Germain. In 2020-21, Arsenal looked as though they might surrender a top-three berth and Champions League qualification to an emerging Manchester United side.



JAYNE LUDLOW

The Welsh midfielder scored 211 goals in 356 games for the club, meaning she remains the club's record goalscorer. Ludlow won 11 league titles, seven FA Cups, six League Cups and a European Cup during her 13 years at the club. Not bad...



RACHEL YANKEY

With over 150 Arsenal appearances and 129 England caps, 'Yanks' is regarded as one of the country's finest talents. Across two spells at the club as a forward, she won six league titles, nine FA Cups, six League Cups and a European Cup.

Clockwise from far left Captain Kim Little celebrates scoring against Aston Villa in October 2021; Joe Montemurro led Arsenal to their first league title in seven years in 2019; Arsenal signed England forward Alessia Russo ahead of the 2023-24 season

However, a strong run in the spring saw them take third place and Montemurro stepped down at the conclusion of the campaign, reasoning that he had taken the team as far as he could. Swede Jonas Eidevall was appointed in his stead and Arsenal made a series of backroom appointments designed to better keep pace with the tempo being set by Chelsea and Manchester City.

The Gunners again decided to flex their muscles in the market. Arsenal moved to a more transitional style of play under Eidevall but would miss out on the 2021-22 WSL title to Chelsea by just one point. Despite this disappointment it showed that they could compete against their rivals once again. After a disappointing 2022-23 season that was marred by injuries to key players, the club once again looked to rebuild, signing the likes of England forward Alessia Russo.

Arsenal are not the only show in town any longer. The landscape has altered and women's football in England has become much more competitive. However, the Gunners are still considered one of the 'big three' in the WSL alongside Chelsea and Manchester City. Put simply, they have won all the domestic trophies more times than any other English club and remain the only club from the UK to win the European Cup. Their star still shines brightly at the summit of women's football.

Images Alex Morton/Stringer/Getty Images (Little), David Price/Arsenal FC via Getty Images (Montemurro, Miedema, Ludlow), Ben Hoskins/Getty Images (Smith), Phil Cole/Allsport/Getty Images (Spacey), Christopher Lee/Getty Images (Yankey), Daniela Porcelli/Eurasia Sport Images/Getty Images (Russo)

WØ



FROM THE FFT ARCHIVES:
JUNE 2023

Martin Ødegaard was just 15 when he first trained with Arsenal. Now, at 24, he's finally their captain. *FourFourTwo* speaks to those who were there for this coming-of-age story, as the Norwegian star survived the chaos of the Bernabeu and found a home in London

Words Mark White

ØDERKID

Arsene Wenger offered to take Martin Ødegaard out for dinner. His treat. Martin ordered the steak.

This was December 2014, more than six years before Ødegaard moved to north London, when it would be Mikel Arteta tempting him to Arsenal in an entirely different era. Wenger was planting the seed of a tree whose shade he would never get to enjoy personally.

On that night long ago, three people, the future unknown to them, sat around a candlelit table and discussed football, development and values: the Arsenal manager, a teenage Ødegaard and his father. Hans-Erik had been a reliable, uncapped midfielder in the 1990s for Stromsgodset in Norway, but now the biggest clubs in Europe were lining up to lay gifts of gravity and light at his family's feet – not because of his own talents, but because his son was already the jewel of the Norwegian game. Martin wasn't even old enough to order a glass of wine with dinner.

Wenger spoke of the pathway Martin would take at Arsenal's leafy London Colney base, where the tyro had enjoyed a training session that afternoon, but also how he could develop as a person ▸



under his tutelage. He would learn to cook. He'd visit local hospitals. He'd contribute to the community. It was as if Arsenal's boss was already assembling the next leader of this football club.

He'd eventually get there, of course – the long way round – because Wenger was often right about the direction that a young player's career would take. At the time, a 15-year-old Ødegaard sat, wide-eyed, feeling ever more painfully self-conscious. Playmakers tend to be hyper-aware, after all.

"It's Arsene Wenger, you know?" he said of the odd dinner date years later. "I was so nervous. I was just sitting there thinking, 'Is he analysing me now? Is he going to judge me if I eat the fries?'"

A PRINCE WITH NO PRECEDENT

"I got to know about Martin Ødegaard via the Norwegian press," says Norwegian football journalist Thore Haugstad. "Everybody began writing about this kid who was scoring loads of goals and playing with adults. You saw clips of him pirouetting in games, the great goals he was scoring, and you realised... this is not normal."

Especially in Norway. The national team of this sleepy, icy landscape, with a population of just over five million, last played at a men's World Cup only months before Martin was born, in 1998. Rather like Erling Haaland, his junior by only a year and a half, Ødegaard owed his development not to the streets and the system but to his father's own steel will, which he would develop in turn.

Hans-Erik Ødegaard invested money in an artificial pitch, carefully coaching his son's talents like a conductor overseeing a pianist. Ødegaard Jr spent his childhood honing his swivel and sparkle. However, not even Hans-Erik could have pictured quite how steep this journey's ascent would be.

"I first met Martin when he was 11 and he joined Stromsgodset, the team his father played for," says Iver Fossum, a midfielder and Norway international who now plays for AaB Aalborg in Denmark. "I was 13. Normally at that age, two years' difference between kids is a lot, but not for him. He was exactly then as he is now: calm and not saying much. He just played football."

And boy, could the boy play. Aged 12, he had been the headline act at an under-16s tournament with rivals who had four years' more muscle. By 13 he had trained with the Stromsgodset first team, and at 14 he was playing senior football. Aged 15 years and 253 days, he made his international debut. His race to the top was scarcely believable. So young was he, the makers of *Football Manager* had to ask his father's permission to include him in their game.

"We came up to the first team at the same time," Fossum tells *FFT*. "In training, he was a small boy dribbling around guys twice his age and twice the size. He made his league debut at 15 and got an assist. We could all see he was going to be unbelievable."

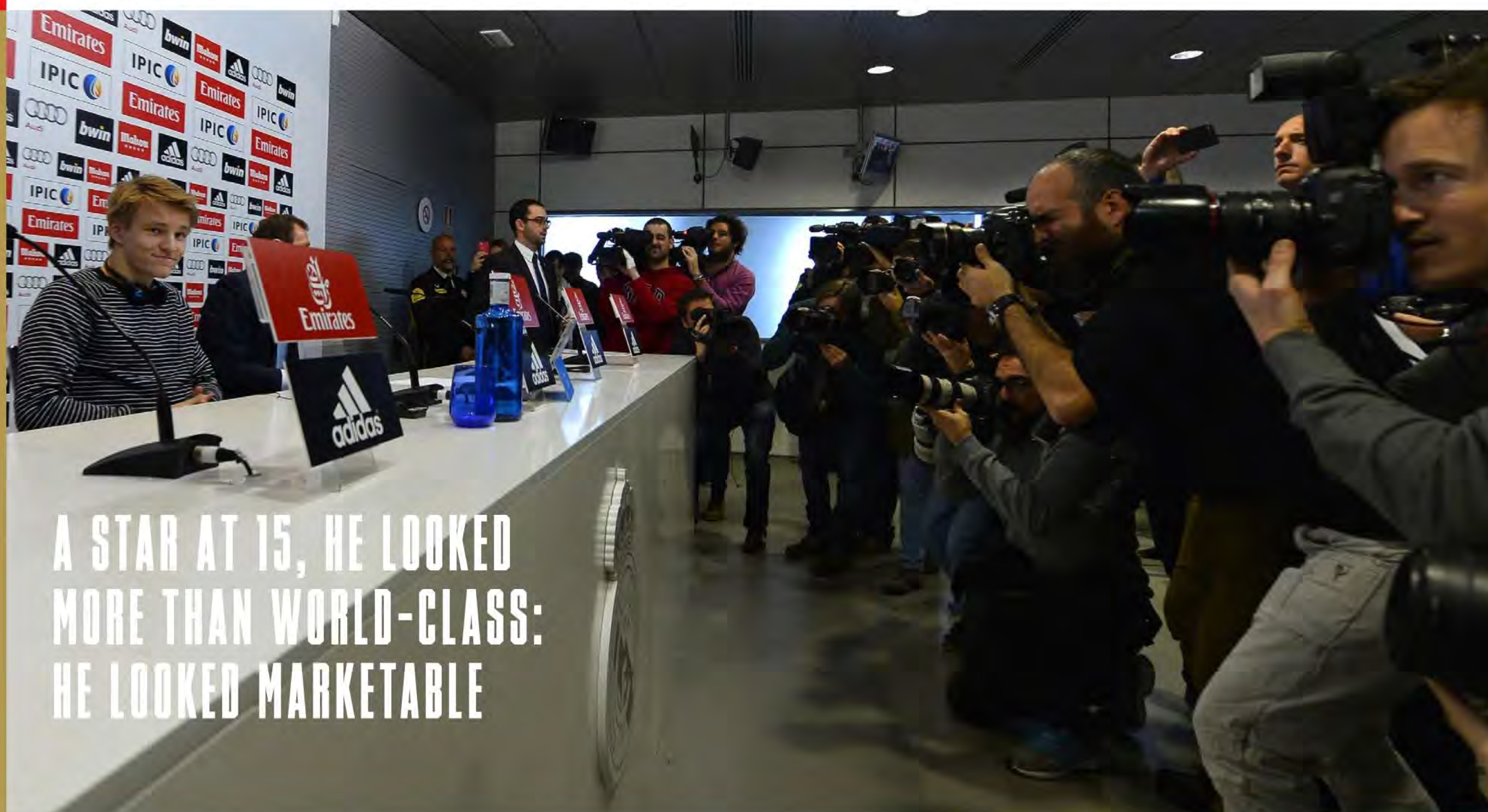
Soon after, everybody in his home city of Drammen knew Martin Ødegaard's name. YouTube clips surfaced of this midfield wizard dropping defenders with a shimmy of his shoulders. He looked more than world-class: in a social media age, he looked marketable. This could be a Scandinavian superstar with swagger, grounded by that very Norwegian brand of modesty.

"He'd been on a pedestal around Europe," explains Graham Hunter, the Spain-based football journalist. "There were two standout footballers at youth tournaments: Christian Pulisic and Martin Ødegaard. Both of them had prominent fathers who were involved in their representation. It was clear that these were two crown princes."

But these youth football festivals were secondary to the Ødegaards' own European tour, as the gods of club football pitched their projects to the family. In a parallel universe, he might have signed for Liverpool.

"He actually grew up as a huge Liverpool fan," says Hunter, "so Liverpool pushed the boat out to try to get him. They got Steven Gerrard to show him around the Melwood training complex, as it was at the time. They put a big effort into convincing him that this was the right environment, playing on how long he'd been a supporter."

Above A Norway international aged 15, Ødegaard had a teenage fanclub **Below** He has since said that he regrets turning up at Real Madrid looking like a right old scruff



A STAR AT 15, HE LOOKED MORE THAN WORLD-CLASS: HE LOOKED MARKETABLE



Ødegaard, and I remember the Norwegian press were trying to put into words what this meant. It was really difficult: there was no precedent at all. The top foreigners we'd had were Tore Andre Flo at Chelsea, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer at Manchester United, and that was it. We hadn't had anything like this before."

Looking rather casual before the flashlights next to a besuited Emilio Butragueno, the club legend who'd segued from Real Madrid player to director of football to head of PR, Ødegaard gasped, "It's unbelievable and it's incredible – I'm ready for the best club in the world." Others thought him far from ready.

"When Ødegaard signed, the stats will tell you that he principally played for Castilla," explains Hunter. "But Florentino wanted him involved in the first-team squad. Carlo Ancelotti, the manager at the time, said no."

And so the teenager was stuck between the youth setup and the first team, as senior figures at the Bernabeu played tug of war. In February 2015, Real Madrid's new star made his bow for the reserves in a friendly against Beijing Guoan, and glittered on the ball. The next thing he knew, he was included in the Champions League squad: not quite the slow progress some had expected. The mixed messages continued. Two months after his arrival, and following sporadic bursts off the bench for Castilla, Ødegaard was publicly dropped by Zidane, as the reserve-team boss found it hard to work with a player who was training with the senior team. The language barrier was also blamed.

"Ødegaard said himself that he stagnated a bit, and it's very easy to see why," says Haugstad. "Castilla were playing in the third division, grouped together with the Basque teams, who are really strong and physical. A lot of the pitches were bad and there were many rumours about him not fitting in and just playing for himself. He was a kid at the time – this was harsh."

Spanish outlet *Diario AS* reported jealousy from other youngsters regarding Ødegaard's reported £80,000-a-week wage. The reserve squad had become imbalanced as a result, *AS* said, and he had rejected requests to train with them more than his contract stated he could. Weeks later, they gave him a mark of 0/10 for his performance in a Castilla match, in which his team had clawed back an equaliser after he had been substituted. Objectively, Ødegaard's performance had not been that bad, but the die was cast.

"Having Zidane as my coach was a very nice thing, but it wasn't particularly good for my self-confidence," Ødegaard admitted in a 2019 interview with Norwegian publication *AD*. Eventually, Carlo Ancelotti would label the transfer a "PR move" by Perez. "He could be the best player in the world; I don't care, because he was not a player I asked for," the Italian snarled after departing as manager.

Ødegaard was a player caught between two ideologies: the president wanting to integrate the jewel of the club's next great era, and the manager pushing a boulder up a hill in the present day.

"They'd been on this winning run off the back of clinching the Champions League in ▸

Instead, Martin and his father realised Real Madrid were the option for them while watching Los Blancos on TV. They phoned Madrid there and then to accept the offer.

Liverpool were disconsolate, given how strongly they had campaigned. Wenger, too, filed Ødegaard – with whom he'd had that dinner just a month earlier – in his 'ones that got away' scrapbook alongside Lionel Messi, Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Cristiano Ronaldo. The boy-wonder from Drammen was going to play for arguably the greatest playmaker of all time: Zinedine Zidane, coach of Real Madrid Castilla, the club's reserve team.

It was as poetic as his playing style. But this was not the same Real Madrid for whom Zidane had cavorted across the turf. They had recently revolutionised their entire transfer policy, to spite their most bitter foes.

"The context around Madrid is important when talking about the move," Hunter tells *FFT*. Two years before it, in 2013, the club had a 21-year-old Neymar within their grasp, only for Barcelona to snatch the Santos superstar. At a club that doesn't taste defeat often, Real Madrid president Florentino Perez found the sting unbearable. Hunter continues: "He told his scouting team, 'Get me as many of the world's biggest young talents as possible, so we can stick it up Barcelona's nose – if there is another Neymar, I want the next six of them'." Ødegaard was one of the lucky few.

Fossum recalls, "It was the biggest club in the world and we thought it was the perfect step. He was only 15 and everyone thought he was well on course to become Norway's greatest-ever player."

Heritage is heavy. Perez had pivoted 180 degrees from Galacticos to prodigies, and wonderkids were not allowed to fly under the radar any more. Ødegaard, like all good superstars, arrived to the paparazzi's adoring chatter an hour late – but there wasn't much fashionable about his jumper and unwashed mop of blond hair. He has since spoken of cringing now at how unprepared he was for the press conference where he was unveiled as Madrid's next top model.

"It was really unusual," reflects Haugstad. "I'd moved to Madrid three months before

Above He would play for Castilla but train among the Real Madrid first team – with no little friction

Lisbon, then they lost to Valencia in January," says Hunter, of the month that Ødegaard arrived. "There was a pretty humiliating 4-0 defeat to Atletico Madrid at the Calderon a month later, and in that context he wasn't in a position to convince Ancelotti – who was about to lose his job – that he was ready to be a part of the first-team squad.

"I felt sorry for him. His Madrid career didn't take shape in that first spell. He was ignored."

DUTCH COURAGE

In January 2017, a couple of years after the Norwegian had landed in Madrid, Dutch club Heerenveen confirmed that Ødegaard would join them on loan for 18 months. It was an iceberg to the hull of Perez's ego, after he had pushed for the teenager to be slotted in alongside the elite. But if the player's image had taken a hit, too, that news didn't reach his new team-mates in the Netherlands.

"At Heerenveen, we were all so excited for him to arrive," striker Reza Ghoochannejhad tells *FFT* today. "A Real Madrid player, one of the biggest talents in Europe at that time, coming to *our* club – it felt like a big win for everyone. He'd get time to adapt to senior football and develop, while we would have this great talent in our team."

Some mulled if this was the kind of move he should have made all along.

"There was plenty of debate in Norway about whether he had picked the right club – it still continues today," reveals Haugstad. "Some said, 'This is Real Madrid: he can train with Cristiano Ronaldo, Zinedine Zidane is in charge of Real Madrid Castilla, and you have to jump at that chance'. But it was a really charged debate. A lot of people thought he should have moved to somewhere like Ajax, where he could have developed and got into the first team quickly."

Those championing the Eredivisie got their wish, and Ødegaard began the long game of coming good on his potential. He made his debut with a blink-and-you'll-miss-it cameo in a 2-0 victory over ADO Den Haag, touching the ball only once, and when microphones were pointed under his nose afterwards, he gingerly played down personal expectations in order to talk more about the team. His first seven games in blue and white yielded one assist and a single shot. He looked bruised.

Finding confidence took time. It was clear that this 18-year-old had ability you couldn't bottle, but he wasn't yet the Ødegaard who would later captain club and country.

"He was a very good footballer on the field, but if you'd asked the dressing room if he would have been a future Arsenal captain, I'd have said no," confesses Ghoochannejhad. "I think most of the players would agree. As a personality, he was a very calm guy who didn't say much – and that's not a negative thing. It's just the way he was at that time.

"He really understood the game, though. If the manager asked him for his opinion, he always had something to say."

Game by game, he found his groove, and a stunning 25-yard smash against Ajax helped to remind everyone what this boy had in his locker. In the quieter moments, Ødegaard learned how to dictate play. And importantly, after the Castilla drama, he got on with his team-mates: rumours surfaced that Heerenveen had to pay a fee every time they didn't start their Galactico loanee, but the Heerenveen squad wouldn't have cared.

"The terms of his contract really didn't come up," says Ghoochannejhad. "If you're as skilful and as comfortable on the ball as Martin was, no one is going to ask questions as to why he's picked.

"It was so easy for him; he was a natural. But we didn't use him in the correct way at Heerenveen. He was playing as a right winger, often coming off the bench, while adapting to a new country and a new style of football. He was such a hard worker."

Below Making baby steps at Heerenveen



"IF REAL MADRID COULD TOSS ASIDE A PLAYER LIKE ØDEGAARD, WHAT ARE THEIR STANDARDS?"

The following season, Ødegaard headed back to the Eredivisie, this time with Vitesse. Again, he buckled down. For such a delicate footballer, it was as if he felt that he wanted to grind out his potential.

"He always wanted to go a bit further than anyone else – he'd even take an exercise bike into the sauna," chuckles Navarone Foor, a team-mate at Vitesse. "He'd be in the gym doing crazy stuff, attaching weights to his wrists when he was running. We were always laughing, asking what the hell he was doing."

Vitesse resembled a better fit stylistically and culturally. The Arnhem outfit were a bus stop of a club, containing Chelsea loanees and Dutch talents who would inevitably move on to bigger and better things, so what was one more wonderkid? Former CSKA Moscow, Russia and Hull City manager Leonid Slutsky was in charge and more than willing to put an arm around Ødegaard, rather than offer a frosty shoulder as Zidane and Ancelotti had done. The young midfielder's displays continued to improve. Ironically, the game in which his team-mates saw him truly come of age wasn't in the Europa League nor a high-profile Eredivisie clash.

"I remember we played Kozakken Boys in the cup just before Christmas," Foor tells *FFT*. "It isn't always easy to play against amateur teams as they give more than a thousand per cent in their big moment. Even now, an amateur team, Spakenburg, is in the semi-finals of the Dutch Cup this year [they went on to lose 2-1 to PSV]. It's the same here as it is in the FA Cup.

"We were doing everything possible to win this game and needed that quality. Martin stepped up to score in the very last minute. It was a tough, tough match, but he was there. He became a leader with his actions."

In that 2018-19 campaign, a crossroads season in which the precocious playmaker could have skyrocketed or stalled, Ødegaard registered 24 goals and assists.

"I think that's the most impressive thing about him: that he has never really wavered in becoming the best that he could be," says Haugstad. "He could so easily have become a lost talent, given how difficult it was. If he didn't have a very rational head, that probably would have happened."

Instead, he soon outgrew the Eredivisie.

"I've always thought of him as being this great gentleman," adds Ghoochannejhad. "He played for Real Madrid, the biggest club in the world, yet he came to Holland and he was very modest. He was so down-to-earth, and open to feedback from all the coaches. That's why he succeeded."

Below Vitesse saw Ødegaard become more influential as a player and as a squad member





LA REAL DEAL

Like Drammen, San Sebastian is a quiet town on the coastline. It could offer Ødegaard tranquillity and familiarity as he settled into La Liga properly once more.

"The Basque culture is more like Norway," Ødegaard later told *The Players' Tribune*. "People are more reserved on the outside, but once they take you into their hearts, they are so caring and protective. You become one of their own. I loved that."

As the No.10 in a 4-2-3-1, Ødegaard was the centrepiece at Real Sociedad. The loanee had a licence to ad-lib, weaving through defenders with ethereal movement, sliding line-breaking passes like geometric jokes in his pass maps. Against Mallorca, in only his second appearance, he instigated a late counter-attack and with two touches at the other end – one deft, one devastating – he won La Real the game, 1-0. He was La Liga's player of the month for September. It was an invitation for people to sit up and watch.

"At Real Sociedad, he played for a club who wanted him," explains Graham Hunter. "He had a coach, Imanol Alguacil, who was used to working with young players ready to break into the first team. And the brand of football Alguacil wanted to play was very attacking.

"Alguacil knew when to put pressure on youngsters, and when not to do that, and ▶

CURSE OF THE ARMBAND

It's been a rocky road from Arteta to Ødegaard in Arsenal's captaincy quest



2016-18 PER MERTESACKER

The beloved 'BFG' inherited the captaincy from Arteta but only skippered Arsenal in a handful of matches. Poor Per was plagued by injuries and made his first appearance as captain in the 2017 FA Cup Final, of all games. They won, too. These days, he runs the club's academy.

2018-19 LAURENT KOSCIELNY

Next in line, literally, was Mertesacker's fellow centre-back. The Frenchman was promised a move at the end of 2018-19 and, in that leaderly way, went on strike to secure it. In his unveiling at Bordeaux, he took off his Arsenal jersey to reveal his new club's strip underneath, which slightly soured the 350-odd Gunners appearances across nine years of service.

2019: GRANIT XHAKA

Already unpopular at the time, Xhaka tossed away the captaincy by swearing at fans as they booed him off the pitch in a home draw with Crystal Palace. Brought back from the brink by Arteta, he was rehabilitated as Ødegaard's midfield pal.

2019-21 PIERRE-EMERICK AUBAMEYANG

An odd choice for captaincy in the eyes of some, Aubameyang was voted second by team-mates in the original vote that saw Xhaka made skipper. Auba also lost the role after a "disciplinary issue" that eventually led to a contract termination.

2021-22 ALEXANDRE LACAZETTE

Lacazette became the short-term fix before Ødegaard was named captain in the summer of 2021. Although he never let Arsenal down with his actions, fans desperately wanted more from a £50m striker who netted four open-play goals in his final campaign. He departed on relatively good terms to return to Lyon.



he's quite a demanding man. So, Ødegaard was somewhere the supporters loved him, and where he was playing 30-plus games for a team that played very attractive football. There was a blossom of maturity."

Ødegaard had grown, emotionally – for the first time, he told his dad that he wanted to step out and live alone – and also physically. The 20-year-old was ready to conduct the orchestra at the Anoeta.

He ended 2019 with 10 goals and assists in 18 games for Real Sociedad. In the new year, he scored or assisted six times in five Copa del Rey ties to fire the Basques to only the third major final in their history, including a goal that helped to knock out his parent club – a sucker-punch as satisfying as it was controversial in some quarters of the capital. He was ready for a Real Madrid renaissance. With Zidane now in the top job, Ødegaard was recalled in the summer of 2020.

But he would make just three league starts for Real Madrid.

"Madrid is a pitiless, ruthless environment," reflects Hunter. "Look at how brutally Vinicius Jr was treated there. No one was going out to bat for him until he finally took the reins himself and exploded."

Zidane was on a mission to make Madrid prettier to watch. But, like Ancelotti before him, the Frenchman was caught between the present and the future while trying to integrate younger talents.

"Being called back to Madrid and then not getting to play was the last thing he wanted," sighs Haugstad. "I think the most important thing at Real Sociedad wasn't that he was loved, but that he found a place to settle. He was tired of being loaned out all of the time; he wanted to find a home."

The tide had now turned, for both parties. Ødegaard had experienced a few too many knockbacks from his own employers, while Real Madrid were starting to see the young Norwegian as a cashable commodity. In January 2021, a 22-year-old Ødegaard left Madrid for Arsenal, again on loan. He would make the move permanent that summer.

"I think there was a misperception at Real Madrid that Ødegaard didn't have the character to handle pressure and produce in the biggest moments," says Hunter. "Too many people either weren't paying enough attention to him or lost a little bit of faith."

"We had conversations with Martin at Vitesse about what Zidane and Ronaldo were like," says Navarone Foor. "He told us that the guys at Madrid were just on a different level. If Real Madrid could toss aside a player like Martin Ødegaard, I want to know: what are the standards? If he doesn't get a chance there, I can't imagine how good they are."





Clockwise from above left He hit the ground running at Real Sociedad; "Didn't you knock us out of the cup?"; a leader of men at Arsenal; "Mess up and I *will* take that shirt back from you"

"I FEEL AT HOME"

FourFourTwo met Ødegaard at London Colney in August 2022 for a press call, days before he was announced as Arsenal's new captain. After flitting in and out of the line-up in the second half of the 2020-21 campaign, he

BABY GALACTICOS

After losing out on Neymar, Real Madrid decided to snap up a boy wonder or two. Or eleven...



LUCAS SILVA

The day after Ødegaard, Real Madrid signed a 21-year-old Cruzeiro midfielder to great intrigue, yet Silva made only eight first-team appearances. Unable to adapt to European football, either in Madrid or Marseille, he returned to Brazil and now plays for Gremio.



THEO HERNANDEZ

Two years later, in 2017, Real Madrid paid city foes Atletico €24m to release a *Colchonero* born and bred. Like Ødegaard, the left-back had a loan at Real Sociedad, before Paolo Maldini set up a meeting in Ibiza to tempt him to Milan. Madrid sold up at a small loss.



VINICIUS JR

Signed in 2017 to arrive a year later, Vini Jr broke numerous records in joining Madrid, most of them held by Neymar. The learning curve was steep but, helped by Ancelotti and Karim Benzema's Indian summer, a Champions League final winner gave Vini vindication.



RODRYGO

It took €45m to prise Rodrygo from Santos in 2018. As with Vini Jr, he arrived a year later after turning 18, and as with Vini Jr again, it was a slow burn. The Brazilian has had to battle for minutes but came in clutch with key goals in the 2022-23 Champions League.



ANDRIY LUNIN

Real Madrid made Lunin their first ever Ukrainian player when they paid Zorya Luhansk €8.5m for the 19-year-old shot-stopper. After a trio of domestic loans brought very little playing time, he is back on the Bernabeu bench as Thibaut Courtois' understudy.



had, in his sequel season, become one of Mikel Arteta's midfield generals – although the Gunners faltered and finished fifth, losing their Champions League spot to rivals Spurs.

We reminded Ødegaard that he had been in north London for only 18 months and yet, incredibly, Arteta was the longest-serving manager of his entire career. He laughed.

"I moved around a bit too much – maybe not the best thing," Ødegaard replied with a smile. "But I learned a lot from it. I went to Madrid very young; of course, it's hard to play there, so I had to go elsewhere. It wasn't the best situation for me. I wanted stability.

"I have found that here – I'm really happy and I feel at home."

IN A SIDE FULL OF SPARKLING WONDERKIDS, THEIR CAPTAIN IS ONE OF THE WISER HEADS AT 24

If anyone understood the Norwegian's position, it was Arteta. After progressing through his hometown club, the midfielder joined Barcelona as a highly-regarded teen, fighting for playing time with senior figures. He went on loan abroad, impressing at PSG, yet Barça cashed in on him anyway without offering him the opportunity he craved. The expectation, the confidence and the lack of it: Arteta would have noticed all three, watching Ødegaard's trajectory.

"Be careful with that number," Arteta said as his new signing was pictured holding the No.8 shirt. Of course – it was the same shirt Arteta wore for the Gunners.

Even now, nine years on from making his top-flight bow with Stromsgodset, Ødegaard is finding new layers to his game. In a side full of sparkling wonderkids, their captain is one of the wiser heads. He is still deft and delicious, can still drop a shoulder and thread a pass through the eye of a needle, yet he scans the pitch with older eyes. A Time Lord of a footballer, he has lived so many lives in this game already: the wonderkid, the lost soul and now the captain of the ship. He has evolved as a player; changed as a person. Loans left scars, and that lack of belief in him perhaps cut deeper than we know. He has had to grow up the hard way – and he has arrived, right back where he began, eight and a half years after eating steak with Arsene Wenger. The long way round.

"He has my biggest respect, as a footballer but also as a human being," enthuses Reza Ghoochannejhad. "He's had great personal development. Being captain of Arsenal is about more than just your football ability."

"I watched him play recently during the Euros qualifier between Spain and Norway," Graham Hunter remarks to *FFT*. "He shouted to Alexander Sorloth to mark Nacho. Sorloth didn't react, so Ødegaard ran over to him and shoved him, like, 'Go and f**king do what I told you to!' I thought, 'That is certainly not the Ødegaard that arrived at Madrid' – but it's also not the Ødegaard from Real Sociedad. He has markedly changed."

It's a coming-of-age story unlike many others in football. And there are still plenty of chapters left to run.

"If he was to captain Arsenal to the title... seeing a Norwegian lift the Premier League trophy would be so surreal for us," says Thore Haugstad. "The image would last forever in Norway. It has been a rollercoaster but, so far, it has a happy ending."



TAKEFUSA KUBO

Kubo was at La Masia before Barcelona were found to have violated international transfer policy; he returned to Japan and Real just couldn't resist. Three years, four Liga loans and zero Madrid appearances later, he left for Real Sociedad (you again?) in 2022, aged 21.



REINIER

A Flamengo No.10 with both style and panache, Reinier was a €30m statement signing in 2020, brought to Europe and dispatched to Dortmund for a two-year loan. It's not quite worked out: he couldn't crack BVB's starting line-up and has spent time on loan since.



EDUARDO CAMAVINGA

At Rennes, Camavinga shone in a victory over PSG when he was just 16, and Real Madrid brought in the Angola-born Frenchman as a long-term investment. The midfielder has impressed in bursts, also filling in at left-back. Still only 20, he's developing superbly.



AURELIEN TCHOUAMENI

Los Blancos paid Monaco an initial €80m for Tchouameni last summer, earmarking him to replace Casemiro, but sped up the transition when the Brazilian joined Manchester United. With Camavinga, too, Madrid and France have their midfield for the next decade.



ENDRICK

Bursting on to the Brazil scene with ridiculous youth stats and a highlight reel retweeted by Gary Lineker, 16-year-old Endrick – who is compared to Romario – ended rumours last December by agreeing to join Real Madrid in 2024. Neymar? Well and truly forgotten here.

VA VA VOOM

He ruled the Premier League for more than half the decade, then landed the Champions League as part of world football's most celebrated club side of all time. Was there a better player in the noughties? We say *non*

Words Mark White

FROM THE FFT ARCHIVES:
SUMMER 2020



In such moments does a crowd collectively hold its breath. When spotlights inside the Bernabeu converge on Thierry Henry as he wins the ball by the centre circle, those in the stands don't yet know what's coming. But so few footballers in history have been so dangerous from this position.

The Arsenal captain swivels, then slides into second gear, accelerating away from Ronaldo using his deer-like stride. He slaloms between two challenges before breezing beyond Sergio Ramos' lunge, then completes his darting act by arrowing a low shot across Iker Casillas into the bottom corner.

Henry runs to the corner flag in celebration – arms outstretched, chin raised. Arsenal lead Real Madrid 1-0 in the Champions League last 16, despite an injury crisis forcing them to field a D-list defence. And that's how the scoreline stays – because when Thierry Henry is on your team, you always have a chance.

LE PROFESSEUR WILL SEE YOU NOW

Some players are lucky that they can run with a ball like it's stuck to their instep, but few have been given Henry's gifts; the precious ability to drag their team over the finish line, no matter who the opposition.

The first time Arsenal fans caught a glimpse of it was on a grey 1999 day in Southampton. Up until then, the young Frenchman was little more than a gangly, and goalless, £11 million winger haunted by Nicolas Anelka's sour-faced ghost. "I had to be re-taught everything about the art of striking," he later told *FourFourTwo*, nudged along by mentor Arsene Wenger, who insisted he stick at it after years 'wasted' wide.

But on that September afternoon at The Dell, something clicked as he spun Saints substitute Marco Almeida – making his only appearance for the club – and curled a fine effort past Paul Jones for his first Gunners goal.

From there, habits began forming. With every strike, Henry stood a little taller; he finished his first season in English football with 17 league goals, then struck another 17 in his second. In those early days at Highbury, however, Henry was not a fully-developed star; just a swirling, nebulous force drifting in and out of matches and sometimes sprinkling them with gold dust. In a time before name-calling on Twitter and outrageous expectations, the North Londoners' then-record buy was afforded ample patience. Arsene knew best, after all.

Henry required time and space to find form, because he wasn't like other strikers. The ego was deep-rooted, but he wasn't greedy for the goal. The 22-year-old was more Road Runner than Wile E Coyote; a Clairefontaine speedster rather than Ronaldo with a sharper haircut. So many forwards of that era had the air of bland Bond villains, all boring gadgets and dreams of domination, but Henry claimed he "wasn't born with a gift for goals" and even refused to take penalties that he'd been fouled for. ▸



"I think it's a shame there's a lot of focus on the guy who puts the ball in the net," he told *FFT*. It was hardly Alan Shearer DNA. So, tired of the common conjecture which made No.9s the focal point and heroes of every move – not always for the right reasons – the Frenchman became his own breed of striker. "I just wanted to be myself," he asserted.

Henry netted 24 league goals in 2002-03, his fourth season of English football after arriving from Juventus, but the assists column reading '20' was far more noteworthy – and for now, remains a Premier League record, albeit one matched by Kevin De Bruyne in 2019-20. Arsenal's talisman could assist himself – that delightful flick and finish against Manchester United in October 2000 a perfect case in point – but he teed up goals galore for teammates, tilting a little of the limelight in their direction like a compere on a variety show.

"Maybe I don't have that selfishness which makes some strikers special," he once queried. "I'll get upset when people don't pass to each other. To play good football is fragile."

'Fragile' was a word often used in conjunction with Wenger's Arsenal sides. They were bound by belief, that most volatile of ingredients, and everything they did had a delicate grace to it.

Henry confirmed as much, claiming, "When one player isn't in the rhythm of the team, the team cannot exist." But deep down, becoming a master assister was another way of showing that he could have a striker's bullish mentality.

HENRY THE INVINCIBLE

Henry assisted more goals simply because he refused to compromise his game.

Released by Wenger's expression-led values, the No.14 refused to bow to the mechanics of a 4-4-2, instead bending it out of shape. Henry may not have had a selfish streak, but he did have a ruthless belief that his instinct was king. When he eventually discovered it at Highbury, opposition sides were in trouble.

The 2002-03 season was when Henry began to carry the team on his back; most famously when he surged from his own half in a North London Derby like a glowing Pac-Man, eating through Tottenham's ranks before firing home the opener in a 3-0 Highbury success. He was becoming a complete striker.

On a wintery night in November 2002, Henry ascended to his throne, tearing Roma apart in their own colosseum with a shimmering treble. His first goal was a trademark side-footer; his second, a loose ball smashed past Francesco Antonioli. The Frenchman finished off with an effortlessly brilliant free-kick which glided over the Giallorossi wall and into the top-left corner. "When he is on fire, he is impossible to stop," marvelled Roma boss Fabio Capello.

Yet even a burning Henry wasn't enough for Arsenal, who ended that campaign with just an FA Cup for their efforts. A stellar season for some, but it stung Wenger's men.

Henry returned in 2003-04 with a vengeance. He hit 10 league goals in Arsenal's opening 11 league games and helped dismantle Inter at San Siro, scoring twice in the North Londoners' remarkable 5-1 victory. The marksman looked angrier – he'd ditched the Tom Hardy grin and gone full *Warrior*.

Interestingly, though, Henry didn't refine his game to become a better footballer. While so many strikers lose their teenage bombast and evolve into lethal killers in their 20s, Arsenal's star man seemed to do the complete opposite: embracing embellishment, adding more frills and thrills. He revelled in becoming Highbury's elected entertainer, dazzling his subjects with trickery, breathtaking speed and carnival flicks.

"Thierry's acceleration will take him past any defender in the world," said Dennis Bergkamp. With the 2003-04 title race beginning to boil, Henry handed out a lesson in exactly what the Dutchman meant.

Arsenal's half-time break of their April clash with Liverpool was the longest 15 minutes of their unbeaten season. Losing at Highbury, the Gunners were bruised: that interlude became a reflection not just of the previous 45 minutes, but offered flashbacks of recent heartbreaks. The dust hadn't settled from agonising defeats against Man United (FA Cup semi-finals) and Chelsea (Champions League quarters) in the past six days, and their 2002-03 title collapse still hurt. Michael Owen had slotted Liverpool 2-1 in front that Good Friday afternoon – it felt like the 2001 FA Cup Final all over again.

But less than a minute after Robert Pires had equalised, Henry did what Henry had come to do so often: pick the ball up close to halfway, take a single glance and then stride through the heart of Liverpool's backline to put Arsenal 3-2 up. "He could take the ball in the middle of the park and score a goal that no one else in the world could," Wenger once gushed of his prized protégé.

MESSI: "I DIDN'T DARE LOOK AT HIM ON HIS FIRST DAY – I KNEW EVERYTHING HE DID IN ENGLAND"

Henry finished the day with the matchball – an unbeaten title beckoned.

In the years that followed, the strain to pull Arsenal towards more crowns increased. The Gunners conceded their title in 2005, but won the FA Cup in a dour final against Man United, after which Wenger admitted he parked a bus; partly, because Henry was injured.

Patrick Vieira departed for Juventus and his compatriot took the captain's armband. It was a natural progression from Henry's role as the exhilarating frontman of his side, and after 30 goals in all competitions during 2004-05, the Frenchman led by example with 33 in 2005-06 – including that moment in Madrid.

And so Henry's Arsenal career came down to Paris in the spring of 2006: a clash in his home city against Barcelona for the European Cup – the one piece of silverware he had never seen his own reflection in.

At 1-0 up, the Gunners' captain peeled away from Barça's high line, with that familiar stride taking him close enough to see the whites of Victor Valdes' eyes. But for

once, Henry missed. Barça bagged two increasingly inevitable goals after Jens Lehmann's early red card – and with them, the Champions League trophy. Arsenal haven't reached a final since. "With the team that we had, we failed," sighed Henry.

But he remained at Arsenal, to go again with a new four-year deal. Fittingly, after a hat-trick against Wigan to round off life at Highbury, the Frenchman scored the Gunners' first-ever goal at the Emirates Stadium – albeit unofficially, in Bergkamp's testimonial against Ajax. He hit a late January winner against Man United too, in the first game where the new ground rocked with the same verve that the old place used to.

A month earlier, all had seemed rosy. "The club have the same ambitions as me," he said. "Regarding the recruitment in the summer, my confidence was not betrayed. I am at Arsenal for life. I will not go to Barcelona."

There was little doubt Henry was increasingly alone at his beloved club, however; one of few Invincibles among early 20-somethings trying to make their own way in N5. Top-two finishes had spilled into fights for a top-four place, and Wenger's own future at the club was uncertain. Sure enough, the captain would regret his own words when he finally swapped leafy London Colney for the heat of the Camp Nou in 2007. It was time.

"The first day, I didn't dare to look him in the face," Lionel Messi said of his new teammate. "I knew everything he had done in England."

IT'S LEO'S WORLD, NOW

But a challenging first season in Spain awaited Henry, now 30 and having to fight for a place upfront with Messi, Samuel Eto'o, Ronaldinho, Eidur Gudjohnsen and a young Bojan.

Initially, manager Frank Rijkaard told his new signing – a top-four Ballon d'Or finisher in five of the previous seven years – that he wouldn't get into the side.

"I went there knowing that I wasn't going to start," Henry later revealed. "But I thought, 'I'll show you that I can'."

Although Rijkaard ended up starting Henry more than any other forward in 2007-08 after an early injury to Eto'o, the Frenchman's debut campaign was no party-starter; 19 goals in all competitions made him Barça's top scorer, but his tally was just one more than Eto'o's despite making 19 more appearances. The Catalans won nothing, and Rijkaard was out.

But incoming coach Pep Guardiola had new ideas. An unused substitute when Henry took Roma to the cleaners, Barcelona's new boss remoulded his ageing icon. "I learned how to play football again," summarised Henry.

He rediscovered his lightning burst, studied what Guardiola asked of him and re-acquainted himself with the left wing, forming a lethal triumvirate alongside Messi and Eto'o. In December 2008 he struck a hat-trick against Valencia, but saved his most memorable display for April the following spring: a scintillating two-goal show in Barcelona's 6-2 rout at the Bernabeu, cruelly cut short by injury after an hour.

Henry also scored against Lyon and Bayern Munich en route to another Champions League final – and this time he got to hold the famous trophy after a 2-0 win over Man United in Rome.



Clockwise from top left Double delight in 2001-02; "Hey Bobby, what's the French for '1-0 to the Arsenal?'"; finally a Champions League winner, with Barcelona and Messi

In 2008-09, the world acknowledged Messi as football's new conqueror – 38 goals in one season at 23 will do that. Eto'o helped himself to 36, while Henry netted 'only' 26, adding 10 assists for good measure. He was back to his supporting role, and happy to do so having led the charge for so long.

Before Messi's effortless climb to the top tier of footballing royalty, however, Henry was the most complete player that the noughties had to offer; a breathtaking mixture of grace, pace, strength and vision.

Henry smashed more goals for Arsenal than anyone else; for France, too. While Kevin De Bruyne equalled his Premier League assists record in 2019-20, it's telling that it has taken this long, while ignoring the fact Henry also scored 24 league goals in 2002-03.

But perhaps what truly set Henry apart was making it all seem so easy. He made a languid, stop-start change of pace look cool, justified a Gallic shrug with his excellence, and blazed a trail through Europe with panache. He didn't just run with the ball – he danced with it. And he had a whole lot of fun while doing it.

MORE ON FOURFOURTWO.COM

- Year Zero: The season that made Henry at Arsenal (*by Joe Brewin*)
- Gilberto Silva tells *FourFourTwo* how Man United inspired Arsenal to 2003-04 Invincibles season
- You Ask The Questions: Thierry Henry (*by Darren Tulett*)

Images Getty Images, PA (Pires)

"THOMAS, CHARGING THROUGH THE MIDFIELD...



Image Bob Thomas Sports Photography via Getty Images

IT'S UP FOR GRABS NOW!



Before Aguero there was this: George Graham's rebuilt Arsenal against Liverpool in the final 90 minutes of the entire season. But as a TV audience of millions watched on, no one would have predicted its dramatic conclusion

Words Louis Massarella

"Please, please, please, please, please, just f***ing... F*** OFF! You have arrived during the worst 60 seconds of my life and I really don't want to see you."

It's 10pm on May 26, 1989. In a flat in Highbury, North London, the buzzer has sounded and Paul, the Arsenal-obsessed protagonist of Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* film adaptation, is understandably irate. The visitor couldn't have called at a worse time. Approaching injury time in the Division One championship decider at Anfield, Arsenal lead Liverpool 1-0, but desperately need a second goal to steal the title.

The referee stops the game so Arsenal's Kevin Richardson can receive treatment for cramp. Mad-eyed midfielder Steve McMahon tells his Liverpool teammates there's just "one minute" remaining, signalling forcibly with his right index finger. John Barnes and John Aldridge exchange a 'tag' of the hands. They think it's all over.

So does Paul and, believing it might be love interest Sarah at the door, dashes downstairs and into the street, leaving best mate and fellow Gooner, Steve, alone in agony in front of the television. But when Paul returns moments later, Michael Thomas is through on goal with just Bruce Grobbelaar to beat...

For fans of Liverpool and Arsenal, the difference between Thomas scoring and missing was the difference between agony and sheer, unadulterated ecstasy on the other. For millions more watching live on TV, it was the most dramatic sporting moment of that or any other year. It was also a far cry from the Premiership procession we've become accustomed to. In 1999-2000, Manchester United won the title by 18 points, while Arsenal finished 11 points clear in 2003-04.

Yet as Liverpool and Arsenal squared up in 1989, it was 47 years since an entire season had gone down to the final day between the two top teams when the Busby Babes beat Arsenal 6-1 at Old Trafford to claim their first title. It wasn't expected to conclude that way in 1952, and it certainly wasn't expected to play out that way in 1989.

RANK OUTSIDERS

In August 1988, Arsenal had no more than an outside chance of winning their first league title for 18 years, having finished sixth the previous season. A Double winner as an Arsenal player, George Graham had been manager for little over two years, and had extensively rebuilt his team. Out went Viv Anderson, Kenny Sansom, Steve Williams, Graham Rix and Charlie Nicholas, and in came centre-forward Alan Smith, winger Brian Marwood, midfielder Kevin Richardson and defenders Lee Dixon, Steve Bould and Nigel Winterburn. The new signings joined home-grown quartet Tony Adams, David Rocastle, Michael Thomas and Paul Merson, with David O'Leary, John Lukic and Paul Davis retained.

It was a time of transition. The new names expected to take time to find their feet, and expectations were low. "Liverpool were going to win the league," says Arsenal fan Robert Frumkin. "Second or third would have been good for us."







"WE PLAYED SOME GOOD STUFF. WE WERE THE DIVISION'S HIGHEST SCORERS, SO WE COULDN'T HAVE BEEN BORING"

Clockwise from top left Steve Bould challenges John Aldridge for a header; Arsenal made it difficult for Liverpool to play their usual game; The Gunners stood tall against the reigning champions

But Tony Adams thought differently. The day after England's first-round exit at the 1988 European Championship, the Arsenal skipper bet ITV's perma-tanned football anchor Jim Rosenthal £50 that the Gunners would come out on top the following season. With Liverpool overwhelming favourites to defend their title, Rosenthal's money seemed safe.

For the 22-year-old centre-back, though, winning the league became a personal crusade. Turned inside out by Marco van Basten during England's 3-1 defeat to the Netherlands, Adams had come to be viewed by the media as the embodiment of everything that was wrong with the English defender: too slow, too agricultural, too uncultured.

Having been made the scapegoat for England's failure, Adams began the season being subjected to donkey noises from opposing fans. It got progressively worse, the low point coming after a 1-1 draw at Old Trafford, when he scored at both ends. The following day, he looked at the back page of the *Daily Mirror* and saw a picture of himself with a pair of donkey's ears attached to the side of his head. Privately, the criticism hurt Adams. Publicly, it motivated him. "I thought: we're going to win the league and show them," he later remembered.

In his autobiography *Addicted*, Adams boasts that Arsenal "squeezed and squeezed teams, then squeezed them more", using the Highbury pitch – one of the smallest in the First Division – to pressurise their opponents in all areas of the field. In fact, Arsenal were more successful away from home, winning 12 games on their travels, soaking up pressure before hitting teams on the counterattack. At Highbury, where the onus was on them to dictate the pace of the game, they fared worse with just ten victories – an unusually low number for a team with title aspirations.

Labelled a long-ball team in certain quarters, Arsenal under Graham relied heavily on moving the ball forward quickly. Graham's Arsenal looked to Smith's close control and aerial ability to bring the likes of Merson, Marwood and Rocastle into the game. "They're fast, fit and pragmatic," was David Lacey's diplomatic interpretation of Arsenal's strengths in *The Guardian*.

"We played some good stuff," counters Smith. "And we were the division's highest scorers, so we couldn't have been boring."

At Anfield, however, 'pass and move' was still very much the Liverpool groove. The Reds had won the title by nine points the previous season and with Ian Rush returning from Juventus to bolster an attack already boasting Aldridge, Barnes and Peter Beardsley, they now looked even stronger.

"We'd lost that glow of invincibility at the 1987 Littlewoods Cup Final," admits Liverpool fan Anthony Teasdale, recalling Arsenal coming from behind to beat Liverpool 2-1, "but you just couldn't see anyone but us winning the league that year." ▶

Images Mark Leech/Getty Images (Aldrige/Bould, McMahon/Adams), Trinity Mirror/Mirrorpix/Alamy (wall)



LIVERPOOL'S RUN-IN

EVERTON 0-0 LIVERPOOL
May 3

LIVERPOOL 1-0 NOTT FOREST
May 10

WIMBLEDON 1-2 LIVERPOOL
May 13

LIVERPOOL 2-0 QPR
May 16

LIVERPOOL 5-1 WEST HAM
May 23

ARSENAL'S RUN-IN

ARSENAL 1-0 NEWCASTLE
Apr 15

ARSENAL 5-0 NORWICH
May 1

MIDDLESBRO' 0-1 ARSENAL
May 6

ARSENAL 1-2 DERBY
May 13

ARSENAL 2-2 WIMBLEDON
May 17





Clockwise from top Smith puts Arsenal ahead; Thomas lifts the ball over Bruce Grobbelaar to seal it; John Lukic celebrates with the Arsenal fans; Ian Rush with a rare Liverpool chance

Even so, Liverpool's form leading up to the turn of the year was patchy, largely due to injuries to Rush and Alan Hansen. When Arsenal hit the front for the first time on Boxing Day, Liverpool were sixth. And by the time the Gunners demolished fellow title contenders Everton at Goodison Park on January 14, leaving them 11 points clear of Liverpool, the bookmakers had installed Graham's men as odds-on favourites.

But the favourites tag didn't stick comfortably to Arsenal. "There was still an underlying fear that we might make a mess of it," admitted Adams, reflecting on 19 dropped points between January and the season's end.

As the Gunners wobbled, Liverpool grew ever stronger. After losing at Old Trafford on New Year's Day, the Reds won 15 of their next 18 league games – drawing the other three – to gradually erode Arsenal's lead. In early April, Liverpool thumped Sheffield Wednesday 5-1 to finally top the table and everybody outside Highbury assumed the writing was on the wall. Arsenal returned to the summit following a 1-0 win over Newcastle, but Liverpool would regain the top spot if they won their game in hand. First, though, there was the small matter of an FA Cup semi-final against Nottingham Forest.

That the top two teams would play each other on the last day of the season to decide the title was not just a happy coincidence thrown up by the fixture list. On April 15, 97 Liverpool fans were crushed to death at Hillsborough. The match was abandoned and



ARSENAL ON THE BIG SCREEN

Anfield '89 was immortalised in a movie adaptation of Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch*

There are some moments in football that you simply couldn't write. Arsenal's last-gasp championship clincher in the dying embers at Anfield, however, was one that translated nicely to the big screen.

Based on Nick Hornby's novel of the same name, *Fever Pitch* featured real-life Arsenal fan Colin Firth as the dashing lead and real-life Arsenal fan Mark Strong in a supporting role, with the 1988-89 season providing the backdrop for a story about two teachers who start seeing each other, only for Arsenal to keep getting in between them.

It's not often that Tony Adams becomes a background reference for a love story, but the rollercoaster of the season perfectly followed the conventions for such a story: hope and excitement in the early stages, followed by a rocky patch where all seems lost, before the unlikely but inevitable happy ending. The movie itself was filmed around North London, with shots of the actual Highbury in the final cut, as well as Craven Cottage, whose terraces doubled up as the North Bank.

Later, an American version was made, starring Jimmy Fallon and Drew Barrymore, with the backdrop of 'soccer' replaced by baseball side Boston Red Sox. Not that Firth watched the lookalike movie. "It felt a little like someone cloning your cat," he later joked to Fallon.

Fever Pitch was not the first time Arsenal had made it to the big screen, though. The club and Highbury also featured in 1939's *The Arsenal Stadium Mystery*.



"WHEN ARSENAL HIT THE FRONT FOR THE FIRST TIME ON BOXING DAY, LIVERPOOL WERE SIXTH"

Liverpool's next two league games were postponed as the club, its supporters, the nation and the football world mourned.

Rearranging the fixtures, the Football League realised they had a potential decider on their hands, so switched Liverpool's home game against Arsenal from April 22 to Friday, May 26. Kicking off at 8.05pm, the final act was to be screened live on ITV.

Between May 3, when they drew with Everton, and the showdown with Arsenal, Liverpool played and won six times. Arsenal, who had to play just three times during the same period, contrived to drop five points at home, losing to Derby before drawing with Wimbledon in their penultimate game. If anybody looked tired, it was Graham's men. In truth, the pressure had told. "You get on edge and forget what got you there in the first place," explains Smith. "After the Wimbledon game we did a lap of honour to thank the Highbury crowd for their support and they clapped us as if to say, 'Well done, hard luck'. Even the chairman came into the dressing room afterwards to say, 'You've had a great season, you'd done us proud.' He didn't say, 'You've had it now', but you could read between the lines."

With the media already writing off Arsenal's chances of victory at Anfield, Liverpool entertained West Ham on the Tuesday night, knowing that victory would leave them needing just a draw against the Gunners three days later. Hoping the relegation-threatened Hammers would do them a favour, Arsenal could only watch in horror as Liverpool won 5-1, relegating West Ham and dictating that only defeat by a two-goal margin would take the title south.

"I remember I was at the Football Writers' dinner when Liverpool played West Ham," recalls Smith. "They kept scoring, two, three, four... and we kept saying, 'How many have we got to beat them by now?'"

Michael Thomas was equally confused. "Then George came over, messing around, punching me in the arm, saying, 'Two-nil? Not a problem!'"



FUEL THE FIRE

Sensing the tension in his players, Graham gave them two days off after the Wimbledon game, leaving others to motivate his team. "But for injuries [to Liverpool], the climax would doubtless not have been so belated," said *The Times*. "For the sake of the English game, Liverpool must win," said Charlie Nicholas, referring to the respective styles of play and clearly still smarting having been forced out of Highbury by Graham. "You don't have a prayer, Arsenal," added *The Mirror*, while *The Sun* opined that the Gunners were there to simply make up the numbers. ▶

Images PA Images/Alamy (Smith), Mark Leech/Getty Images (Winterburn/Rush, Lukic), Allsport UK/Getty Images (Thomas), Moviestore Collection Ltd/Alamy (*Fever Pitch*)

"We're not worried about Arsenal now," said Liverpool midfielder Steve McMahon, echoing *The Times*' opinion that an Arsenal triumph was clearly "Impossible".

Graham, though, remained in ebullient mood: "We don't concede anything. Why should we? I firmly believe we can win at Anfield and my players do as well."

According to Smith, the mood in training was the most relaxed he can ever remember in the build-up to a match. "It was one of those games where we just thought, well, nobody fancies us, we know what we've got to do, we might as well just go up there and give it a shot. But I didn't expect us to win."

But Thomas, and other members of the Arsenal camp, did. "It was Liverpool, we'd played against them before, there was no fear factor, but our frame of mind was made easier because we were expected to lose."

With the pressure off, Graham performed one last motivational trick to ensure his team remained fully focused. On the coach up to Merseyside, he took out a newspaper article and passed it round. In it, Anfield legend Graeme Souness wrote off the Gunners as "boys" against Liverpool's "men". Graham's "boys" could not have been more ready.

Liverpool hadn't been beaten by two goals at Anfield for three years. Arsenal hadn't won there for 14. Despite their impressive away form, the odds were stacked against them being crowned champions – 7/1

Right Michael Thomas with a young Gunner **Below** Arsenal's defensive rocks, Tony Adams, Steve Bould and David O'Leary



against, if the bookmakers were to be believed. “We thought we’d blown it,” admits Robert Frumkin. “Win 2-0 at Anfield? Yeah, right.”

The red half of Merseyside also expected to come out on top, even though this was Liverpool’s third game in six days. “It was nice to have some real competition for a change,” says Anthony Teasdale, “but I was confident we’d do it.”

In his team talk, Graham preached caution. “Keep it tight, keep it tight, don’t let them settle,” he stressed. “Pressure, pressure, pressure all over the field. I won’t be too disappointed if it’s 0-0 at half time.”

Graham had a game plan. If Liverpool scored first, he reasoned, Arsenal’s heads might drop. If it was goalless at the interval, doubts might creep into Liverpool’s play and if Arsenal nicked a goal early in the second half, doubt could turn to panic. Liverpool, on the other hand, didn’t quite know how to approach the game. “If you know you have to avoid getting beaten by two clear goals, you don’t play your natural game,” explains Ray Houghton. “What do you do? Do you sit back?”

Crammed in among the 4,000 Arsenal fans, Frumkin describes the atmosphere as the best he’s ever experienced, a heady brew of “energy, passion and emotion”. But with Hillsborough fresh in the memory, Liverpool’s fans were less hostile to visiting teams than they had previously been.

Before kick-off, Arsenal handed bouquets of flowers to supporters around the ground and presented a cheque for £30,000 to the Hillsborough Disaster Fund. But as the game kicked off, it soon became apparent that their generosity ended there.

“The tackling was ferocious. Seldom can English football have been played with such intensity,” said *The Independent*’s Patrick Barclay of Arsenal’s first half. The Gunners made it impossible for Liverpool to play their usual passing game, restricting them to a couple of long-range efforts. Ian Rush pulled his groin dispatching one of them, but even with Beardsley on in his place, Liverpool struggled to keep possession.





Top The team celebrate on the Anfield pitch
Above Michael Thomas and David Rocastle pose with the trophy
Left A rare show of emotion from George Graham after the final whistle

GRAHAM’S GAME

Arsenal’s game plan was working to perfection – and causing confusion among the Liverpool players. “The onus was on them to attack – they needed to win by two goals – but they just sat back,” says Houghton. “That put us off our stride. Maybe they were thinking, ‘These boys have played a lot of games, they must be emotionally drained, maybe we can nick a couple of goals late on’.” ▶

Images Mark Leech/Getty Images (Thomas w/ fan, Adams/Bould/O'Leary, Graham/Smith), Bob Thomas Sports Photography via Getty Images (team), Action Images/Reuters/Alamy (Thomas/Rocastle)

"LIVERPOOL BECAME EDGY, SURRENDERING POSSESSION AS THEY STRUGGLED TO COPE WITH ARSENAL'S ENERGY"

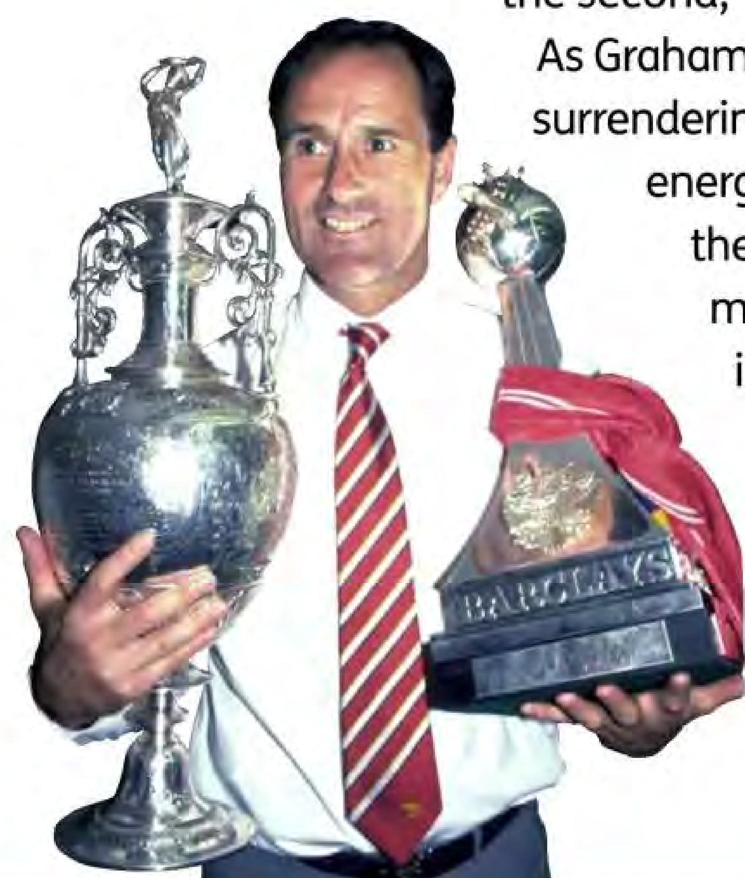
Right Smith ended the season as the league's top scorer **Below** Graham had won the League Cup with Arsenal two years earlier

Yet while it remained goalless, Liverpool were happy. "Kenny Dalglish's team talk just said more of the same," recalls Houghton. "Arsenal still needed to score twice."

Having created the best chance of the first half – Steve Bould's header from Thomas's cross being cleared off the line by Steve Nicol – Arsenal began the second with more attacking intent. On 52 minutes, they won an indirect free-kick on their right, level with the Liverpool penalty area. Nigel Winterburn drifted in the cross and Smith flicked his header into the bottom left-hand corner of the net. One-nil. Or was it? As the ball crossed the line, the linesman raised his flag, then lowered it again. The Liverpool players appealed.

"But they were caught in two minds," says Smith. "They didn't know whether to appeal for offside or claim I hadn't touched the ball." After consulting his linesman, referee David Hutchinson rightly gave the goal: television replays show that Smith was onside and had clearly touched the ball, even though it barely changed direction. "People still don't believe I touched it," says Smith.

Both teams had a hand on the trophy, but it was still Liverpool's to release. "Even at 1-0 down I still thought we'd win the Championship," said John Barnes, but confidence was coursing through the Arsenal players: "Once we got the first, I knew we'd get the second," reckons Thomas.



As Graham predicted, Liverpool became edgy, repeatedly surrendering possession as they struggled to cope with Arsenal's energy. Twice Gary Ablett came to the rescue, first clearing the ball after Grobbelaar had dropped a cross, then making a vital tackle as Richardson wound up a shot inside the box.

Then, on 74 minutes, came the chance that Arsenal had been patiently waiting for. Richardson worked the ball to Thomas just inside the penalty area, but with the goal at his mercy he dragged the ball wide. As the game ebbed and flowed, Liverpool spurned a golden chance to kill the game off;

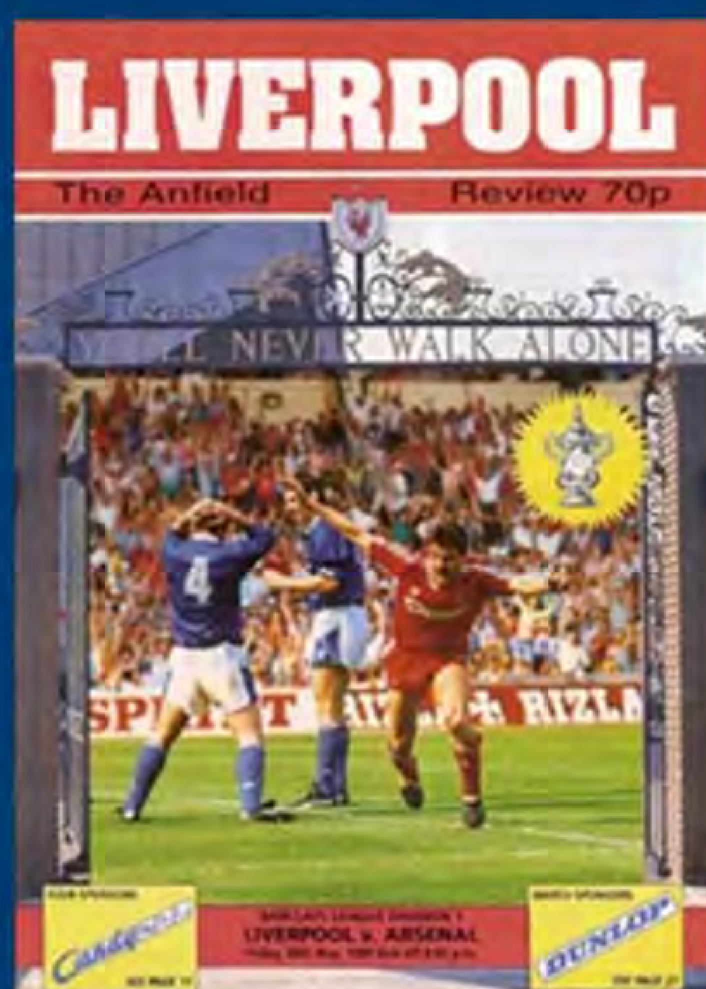


Aldridge flicking on to Houghton, only for the midfielder to volley high into the Kop.

From Liverpool's perspective at least, the shot had eaten away at precious seconds as the clock ticked on towards 90 minutes. "One thing I always remember is Kenny Dalglish getting the ball when it went out for a throw-in and throwing it back so it just caught the edge of the pitch and bounced back towards the dugout," recalls Smith. "It was just time-wasting, because the Anfield crowd were whistling for full time. There's no clock at Anfield, so the players didn't know how long was left, and the crowd just started whistling at around 87 minutes."

"THE BEST NIGHT OF MY FOOTBALLING LIFE"

Arsenal fan Amanda (Twitter: @goonergirl1969) on what it was like to be at Anfield that night



"We got to Anfield at around 5pm and there wasn't a Gooner in sight due to the holdups on the M6. My father made us leave Ilford, Essex, at 10.00am. Of course, being a stroppy teenager at the time, I wasn't happy, but he was oh so right!

"It seemed like an impossible task. When we lost to Derby, I phoned Capital Gold for a rant and said 'it's all over, I can't believe we lost' – I truly believed we didn't have a chance at fortress Anfield. No chance at all.

"I was beyond stressed during the game, especially at 0-0. I couldn't believe Liverpool hadn't scored. I was certain it was going to come, that they were going to get a goal.

"I couldn't believe it when Smith scored, especially when the Liverpool players surrounded the ref because they thought he hadn't touched the ball. When it was given we really felt we might have a chance here.

"But then Thomas missed his chance and I was gutted. I told my dad we should leave so we could miss the traffic. Thank the Lord my dad said no! Years later I interviewed Mickey at the premiere of the *89* film and I said to him: 'You gave us all heart failure, why couldn't you have just scored it?!'

"When Mickey got the second goal, though, it was unbelievable, incredible, mind-blowing. I cried, was lifted up, was kissed and literally we were all just going mad. We just couldn't believe it! We had won by two clear goals and beaten the mighty Liverpool at fortress Anfield to win the league. The best footballing night of my life."

• Amanda is host of The Always Arsenal Podcast



Above Celebrations continue in the Arsenal dressing room **Right** Graham and his backroom staff show off their trophies

"Those last few minutes of the match seemed to take forever," recalled Aldridge. "Even when it was clear that the 90 minutes were up and there was only stoppage time left, we were still all on edge, fearing that Arsenal would score a second."

HISTORY BOYS

With a minute of normal time remaining, John Barnes picked the ball up on Liverpool's right and made for the corner flag. Leaden-legged, Tony Adams slid in, but Barnes skipped round him. "What I did next," remembered Barnes, "cost Liverpool the Championship." Having spotted Richardson closing him down, Barnes elected to dribble past the exhausted midfielder instead of playing keep-ball in the corner. Sticking out a leg, Richardson somehow dispossessed Barnes and poked the ball back to John Lukic (the backpass had yet to be outlawed).

"Just kick it John, for f***'s sake!" screamed Adams, but Lukic chose to ignore his captain and bowl out the ball to Lee Dixon on the right.

"Usually when a goalkeeper was about to throw a ball out and I was nearby, I'd raise my hands in an effort to stop him," said Aldridge. "For some reason – I don't know why – I didn't do it on this occasion."

As Dixon prepared to propel the ball into Liverpool territory, Brian Moore cleared his throat on ITV. "And Arsenal come streaming forward now, in surely what will be their last attack," he roared. "A good ball by Dixon, finding Smith..." ▸

Images David Cannon/Getty Images (Graham), Allsport/Getty Images (Smith, dressing room), Bob Thomas Sports Photography via Getty Images (Graham & staff)

Killing the ball just inside the Liverpool half, Smith turned infield and spotted the run of Michael Thomas. A millisecond later, Moore spotted it too... "For Thomas, charging through the midfield! Thomas!"

Attempting to clip the ball past Nicol, the ball hit the defender, rebounded off Thomas and into the midfielder's path, leaving him through on Grobbelaar's goal... "It's up for grabs now!"

As Moore prepared to explode and a nation sat forward in their seats, Graham screamed: "Shoot! Shoot!" But with chaos unfurling all around him, a moment of Zen-like calm washed over Thomas. "Once I was through, I didn't notice anything going on around me," he says. "It was like time slowed down. I just thought, I'm through, and waited for Bruce Grobbelaar to go down."

With the outside of his right foot, Thomas flicked the ball over the legs of the advancing Grobbelaar and into the bottom right-hand corner of the net, sending the Arsenal fans behind the goal delirious, not to mention Brian Moore... "THOMAS! Right at the end!!"

"In my commentating life I've churned out some respectable lines, but this one people are happy to use as a greeting," said Moore, who died in 2001. "I was in a taxi driving round Piccadilly Circus once when the driver, an Arsenal fan, suddenly and joyfully started repeating the full last minute of my commentary on that night. He knew it word for word. His video of that game must be worn out – and his family with it."

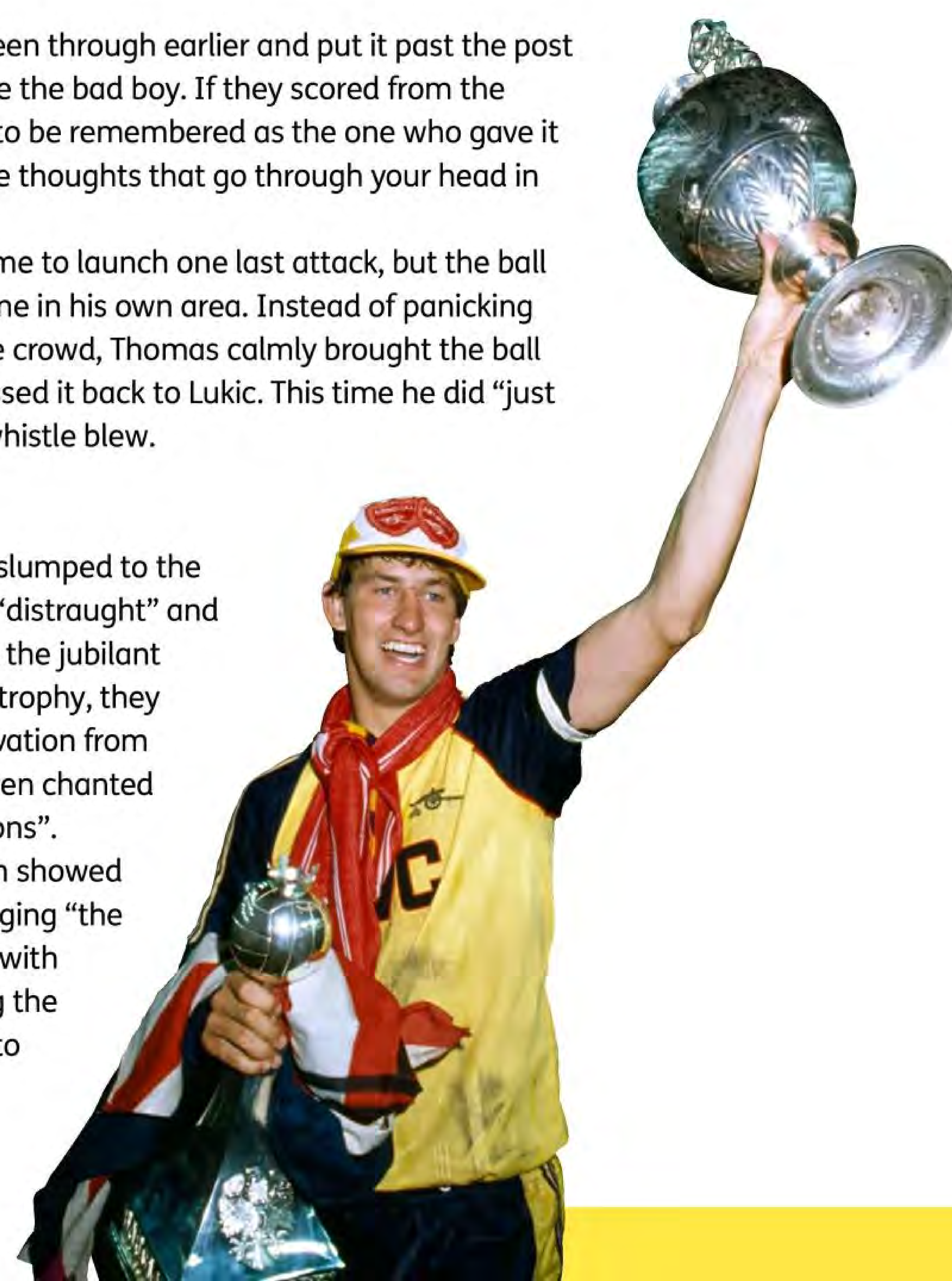
"My biggest regret is that I didn't bring Thomas down," remembers Ray Houghton. "Just as he was getting ready to strike it, I could have. The thing was, he'd been through earlier and put it past the post and I didn't want to be the bad boy. If they scored from the penalty I didn't want to be remembered as the one who gave it away. It's amazing the thoughts that go through your head in a situation like that."

Liverpool still had time to launch one last attack, but the ball fell to Thomas, this time in his own area. Instead of panicking and hoofing it into the crowd, Thomas calmly brought the ball under control and passed it back to Lukic. This time he did "just kick it" and the final whistle blew.

AFTER-PARTY

The Liverpool players slumped to the turf, "shell-shocked", "distraught" and "too upset to talk". As the jubilant Gunners paraded the trophy, they received a standing ovation from the crowd. The Kop even chanted "Champions, Champions".

Surprisingly, Graham showed little emotion, exchanging "the most formal of hugs" with Adams, before leaving the raucous celebrations to









"GRAHAM PERFORMED A STROKE OF MANAGERIAL GENIUS, THE GAME UNFOLDING JUST AS HE HAD PREDICTED"



Clockwise from top left Fans turn out in force for the trophy parade; Dixon, Marwood and Smith with Arsenal's first league trophy for 18 years; Vice-chairman David Dein and chairman Peter Hill-Wood join the celebrations; Paul Merson, the 1988-89 Young Player of the Year; Skipper Adams led by example

his players. The Gunners sprayed the best part of 200 bottles of Champagne and drank the rest. "By the time ITV came in the dressing room to interview me, I was drunk," says Smith. "When I joined up with England a couple of days later, the doctor had to give me an injection in my arse for alcoholic poisoning."

Having thanked the media for motivating his team, Graham sported a gargantuan grin on the team coach, as his players sang themselves hoarse on the journey home.

But as gracious as they were in defeat, to a man the Liverpool players – and their manager – believe that without the fixture congestion caused by Hillsborough, the title would have been theirs. Yet Liverpool didn't appear tired as they thrashed the Hammers just three days before the title decider. "Perhaps it was a game too far," offers Houghton. "If it had been anybody other than Arsenal, we might have been OK. They came to do a job on us and fair play to them, they deserved it."

Such grudging praise made victory no less sweet for Graham. In hindsight, he performed a stroke of managerial genius, the game unfolding just as he had predicted. No wonder he rates that victory over Liverpool as Arsenal's greatest ever. You could even argue that it was one of the greatest victories in football history. Certainly, the *Daily Mail*'s Jeff Powell couldn't be accused of hyperbole when he said: "Never in the history of English football has the championship been won so late, so improbably, so narrowly or with such glory."

RISING STAR

In a few short years, Bukayo Saka went from the fringes of the Arsenal academy to the top of the world. These days, he is beloved as the pride of the Gunners

Words Mark White



A collective heart broke with a single save. Bukayo Saka stuttered in the run-up, 12 yards out from Gigi Donnarumma's goal, before tamely squaring the ball into the goalkeeper's gloves. It was the winger's first ever penalty in senior football on the biggest stage of all.

That Saka missed the decisive spot-kick in the Euro 2020 final is not what has come to define him. What defines him is that aged just 19 years old, he dared to stand there in the first place.

The Ealing-born winger was riding a whirlwind. Off the back of a season in which he was becoming ever more influential for Arsenal, he became that very fabled 'nation's sweetheart' at the Euros, captivating not only for his electric drive on the ball and ability to pop up and make a difference in a team, but for doing so with a smile on his face. That's what we'd all come to know of the starlet.

In fact, Saka has become arguably the most beloved player in Premier League football for the way he plays the game – carefree, yet intelligently. He is, according to those who have met him, the sweetest and most polite person you can ever meet.

But beneath the cool, calm and kind exterior lies a fascinating story of a boy who had to fight for everything that came his way – and following the pain of losing an international tournament with the world's spotlight over his head, had to do it all again.

A STAR IS BORN

Bukayo Ayoyinka Temidayo Saka was born in south London to Adenike and Yomi Saka, who both emigrated to the United Kingdom from Nigeria. Bukayo became interested in football at a young age, playing for local side Greenford Celtic, before a stint in Watford's youth teams, after which Arsenal came calling. It was to become a defining part of his character, as well as his childhood.

Yomi Saka would drive his son from one side of London to the other, just so that he could attend training; young Bukayo would then sleep in the car on the way home. Plenty of parents make such sacrifices for their children – especially when it comes to football – but not many children are as grateful as Bukayo was to his parents for the way they shaped him as a person.

"He's a massive inspiration for me. From when I was young, he always kept me grounded, kept me humble," Saka said of his father after netting his first Arsenal goal against Eintracht Frankfurt. Jack Grealish would later admit that at an England camp, he went directly over to Yomi to tell him, "I love your son." It's often noted by onlookers, teammates, the media and fans how incredibly gracious and well brought-up Bukayo has been. ▶

Images Getty Images, PA







That night in Frankfurt, Saka senior and junior exchanged a thumbs-up, perhaps knowing that every sacrifice had been worth it after all. Bukayo had to battle to be seen in the Gunners' famed Hale End academy as a slight, skinny boy who had physicality and technical quality in abundance, but simply didn't stand out. Saka's superpower wasn't in being the strongest, quickest or best with the ball, but in always making the right decision. There was a maturity there, perhaps instilled in his upbringing, that few players of his age had.

Soon enough, this teenager was being dropped into the heat of more and more first-team games. In making his debut under Arsenal manager Unai Emery in 2019, he became the first player born in 2001 to play in a Premier League match – and it was to be just the beginning.

Freddie Ljungberg, one of Saka's coaches in the Hale End youth setup, was promoted to the first team as a coach that summer as the Gunners looked to oversee the integration of a golden generation of talents into Premier League action, including Emile Smith Rowe, Joe Willock and Eddie Nketiah. Ljungberg would later take interim charge of Arsenal in autumn 2019, leaning on these young guns and infamously dropping Mesut Ozil for his last match in charge.

Arsenal were in flux, after all. Upon falling out of the Champions League in 2017, the club tried to spend their way out of despair, but to no avail. The Emirates Stadium became toxic, and rumours swirled that the dressing room was, too. The big names had failed to deliver, and with Emery's side losing the 2019 Europa League final to Chelsea 4-1 in Baku – on a night in which Saka was an unused substitute – it became very clear to the club's hierarchy that change had to come. By December, former club captain Mikel Arteta was installed as the new coach. A revolution was about to take place.

Saka played the Basque boss's first match in charge against Bournemouth from left-back, where he'd filled in a couple of times, but was hardly a specialist. His teenage exuberance saw him bomb from the back to join in with attacks, getting involved in everything good about this new team's youthful verve. Although there were teething problems in Arteta's first season in charge, things were beginning to look a lot healthier. COVID-19 hit by March, Arsenal would only finish eighth by the end of the season – their lowest position since Bruce Rioch's ill-fated one-season spell that culminated in 1996's appointment of Arsene Wenger – but the summer of 2020 would see Saka lift his first silverware: an FA Cup, in which he'd played as a wing-back through much of the campaign. It was a tumultuous yet ultimately successful first season among the first team, and one that seemed like a sign of things to come.

Above left Saka has become the poster boy for Arsenal, just five short years after first signing a professional contract with the club **Top** Putting Arsenal ahead from the spot against Fulham **Above right** Celebrating alongside his Arsenal teammates after scoring against Bournemouth

ON THE RISE

As a child, Bukayo Saka had watched Alexis Sanchez closely, modelling aspects of his game on the iconic Chilean winger. In August 2020, he was given his shirt number and a more prominent role in the side.

Where the senior stars in north London had wilted in the wilderness years, the young guns had led Arsenal out of the dark – and with this vindication, Mikel Arteta was given licence to reshape his team in the image of the likes of Saka, Gabriel Martinelli and Emile Smith Rowe, as the club looked to a brighter future.

2020-21 was not without its difficulties, however. With the Premier League still confined to playing behind closed doors in the pandemic, Arteta struggled to implement his ideology upon this youthful group. A particularly brisk autumn saw the Spaniard come within a whisker of the sack, as a winless run seemed to drag on forever,

with Saka himself tweeting, "You deserve more, Arsenal fans" and a photo of himself looking dejected.

It was as if he put an institution on his back. The youngster displaced the experienced Willian and club-record signing Nicolas Pepe to hold down the right-wing spot for Arteta, showing levels of creativity that few others could. He was the spark in the Arsenal attack, dragging them forward in transition, showing composure of a veteran and becoming the decisive figure, as Arsenal turned a corner and powered on in the second half of the season.

A performance against West Bromwich Albion typified this new Saka, as he was central in a rout in the snow, dovetailing with Smith Rowe to slice through the eventually relegated Baggies. Against Benfica and Slavia Prague, he sliced open teams with a calmness in the heat of European elimination. He would begin to feature a little more for England, too, perhaps with manager Gareth Southgate wanting to tie him to the Three Lions and prevent Nigeria from poaching him.

Again, Arsenal finished eighth – a far cry from where a club of their stature should be. But Arteta and the Arsenal board had seen enough – especially from Saka, their player of the season. They doubled down on everything that was good about this young side, adding more quality that had room to develop together, as the likes of Aaron Ramsdale, Ben White and loanee Martin Ødegaard all signed that summer. This was a team that was built in the image of its number seven by now, and after three straight losses to start the season, things began to click into gear once more.

Fans may look back at 2020-21 as the moment that they fell back in love with their team. Saka ended a goal drought with a goal against Tottenham at home, and suddenly the team made sense as a collective. This was a side that were bright and passionate, with youngsters across the pitch playing with their hearts on their sleeves.

Saka was instrumental in taking Arsenal back to the level that everyone expected them to be, even if they fell short of Champions League football. The Gunners were reinvigorated, though. The centrepiece was Saka, having risen from the youth setup idolising the likes of Thierry Henry, now himself the man that Arsenal fans looked to for inspiration.

BOUNCING BACK

At Euro 2020, Saka had become one of the most fun footballers that England had at its rich disposal. He dazzled at the tournament, ousting Phil Foden from the lineup and even became a viral meme for posing with an inflatable unicorn in the hotel swimming pool.

After missing that penalty, he became the victim of disgusting racist abuse and a torrent of hate.

"I knew instantly the kind of hate that I was about to receive and that is a sad reality that your powerful platforms are not doing enough to stop these messages," he said a few days after, as eloquently and maturely as you'd imagine from Saka, reminding the nation, "Love always wins". In the way that's come to define him, he rose stronger from the setback.

In 2022-23, Saka once again stepped up to another level, as Arsenal challenged for the title. The winger was in blistering form as Arteta's side led the table by the World Cup break, before Saka went away to Qatar, this time as one of his country's best players. The boy had become a man – and one of the best footballers on the planet, to boot.

"He sets himself new targets and new demands year by year," Arteta claimed. "He wants to be the player that decides games every three days. He's a very focused boy and does everything right."

Against Liverpool in the 2022-23 campaign, Saka stepped up to win the game with a penalty, banishing the demons of the Euros. He would score a worldie against Manchester United, marking it with Marcus Rashford's own celebration. He would sign a new deal with his home club that season, taking his time in red and white up to 2027, and he would become the fulcrum of the attack as Arsenal took a title fight as far as they could against Manchester City's inevitable treble winners, netting 15 goals from the right flank over the course of the campaign.

Come the first day of the following season, he was at it again, curling a stunning strike past former Arsenal goalkeeper Matt Turner to beat Nottingham Forest in the first game of the season, as Arsenal looked to go again after the disappointment of losing a title. After all, that's what Saka does now: he rises from disappointment to become an even better player.

By December 2023, Saka was the fourth-youngest player to have reached 200 appearances in an Arsenal shirt, aged just 22 years old. Five years on from signing professional terms with the side that he'd dreamed of representing, he wasn't just another Arsenal player; he was the very centre spot of the Emirates Stadium. 'Generational' is a word that is often banded about when it comes to talented players, but perhaps it's fitting in this case.

Saka didn't just represent his boyhood club; he became to be its very image. He pulled them up from mediocrity to compete once more – all with a smile on his face, and all while remaining the same humble boy who credited his father for instilling the discipline in him that made him never want to settle at his current level.

When people think of Arsenal now, they think of Saka. It's testament not only to his talent, but his hard work, too. Whatever the future has in store, you know that nothing can keep him down for long.

"HE WANTS TO BE THE PLAYER THAT DECIDES GAMES EVERY THREE DAYS"

Below Saka celebrates at the 2022 World Cup with teammates Harry Kane and Phil Foden



Images Getty Images, PA

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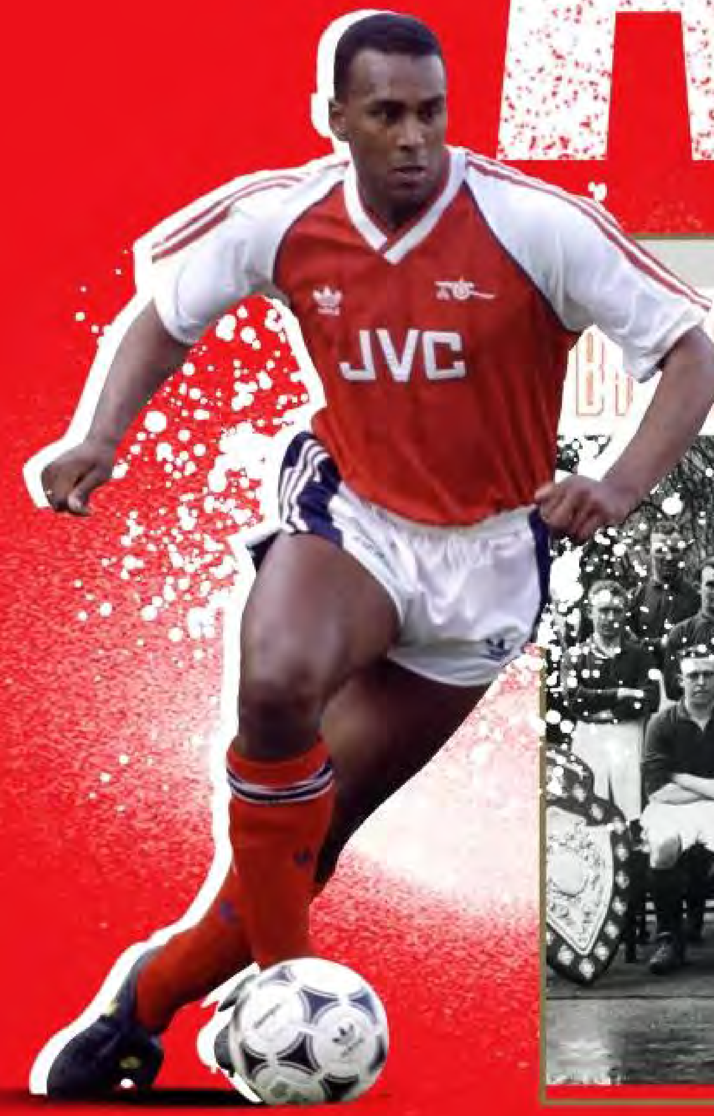


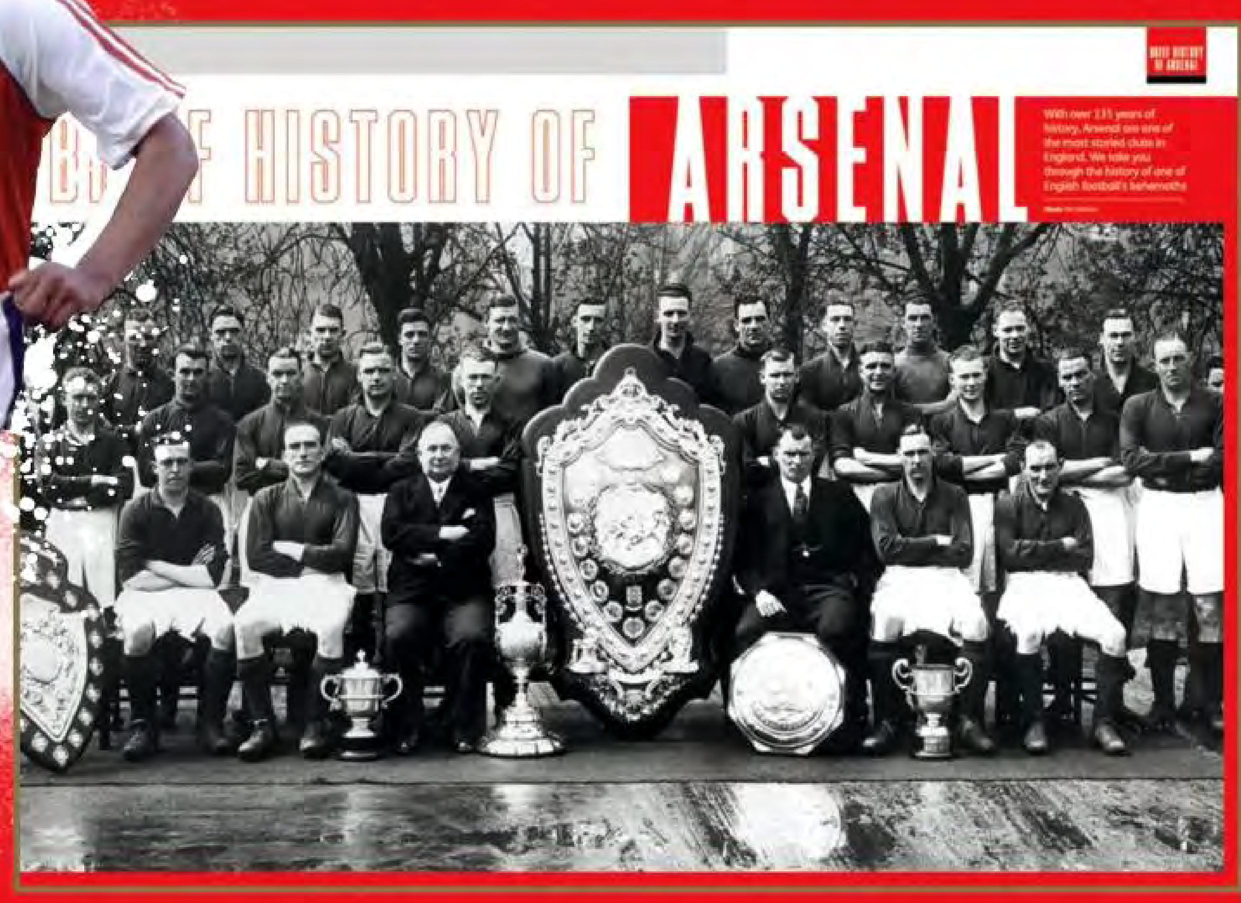
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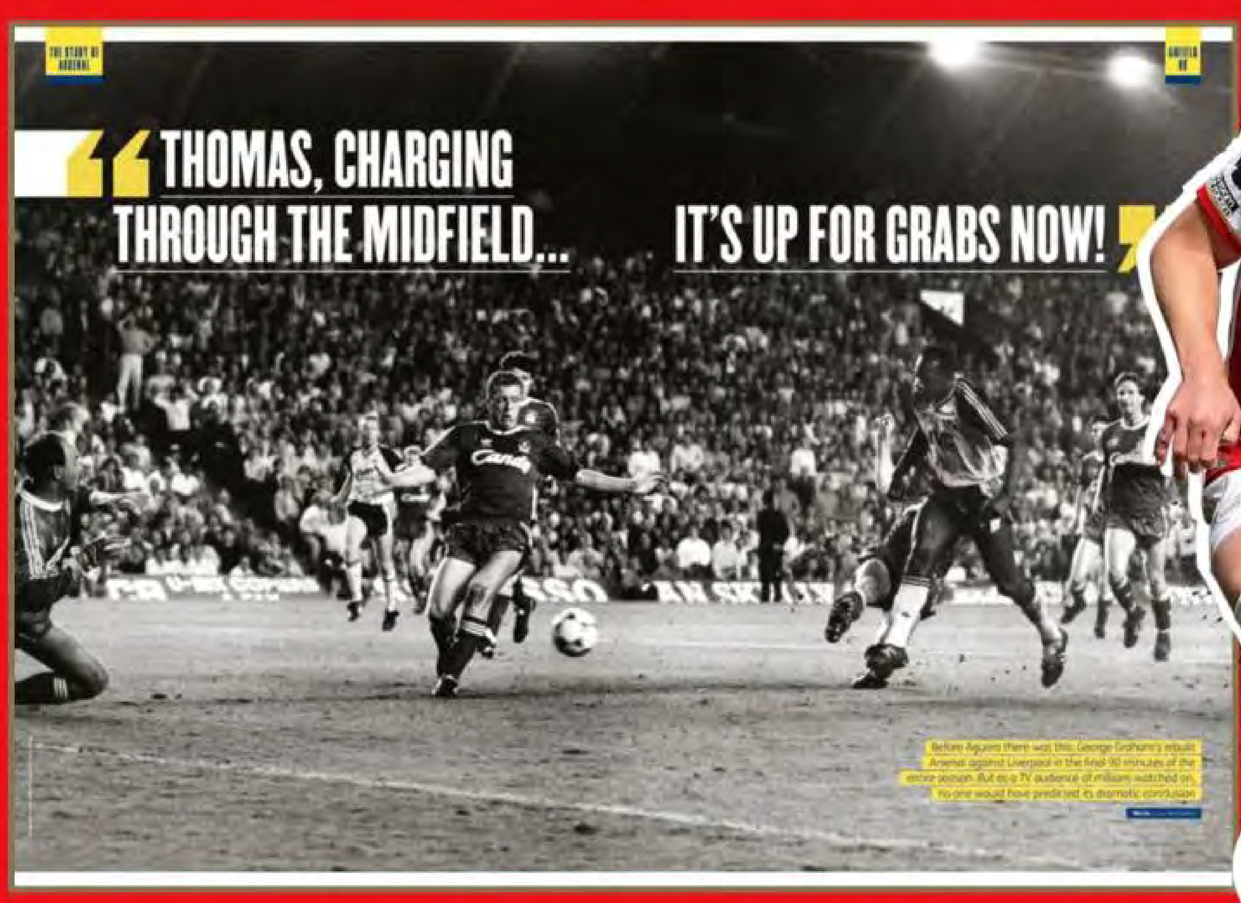
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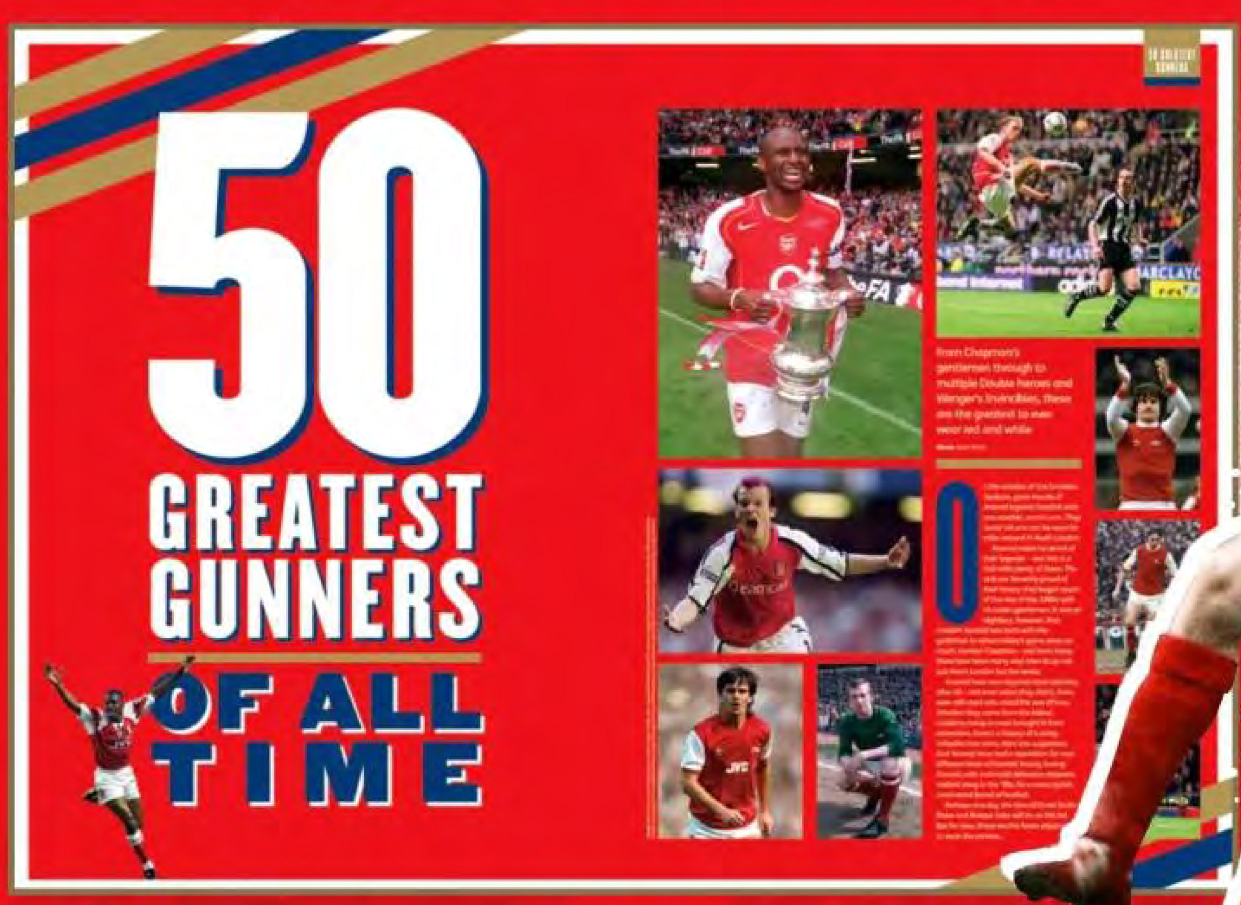
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